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Oral participation in EFL classroom: Perspectives from the administrator, teachers and learners at a Chinese university



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ABSTRACT

The need to improve second language learners' participation in oral communication has been documented in numerous studies. However, policies and practices that would improve Chinese learners' oral language skills in English represent a complex issue that presents numerous challenges to EFL teachers, administrators, and learners. Drawing on a dual Community of Practice conceptual framework, this qualitative study investigated the perceptions of educators and learners on English education at a Chinese university. On the surface, they demonstrated a joint awareness of the importance of classroom oral participation; however, their perspectives on the underlying issues differed. This research delves deeper into the EFL context by exploring how the aspects of oral participation in the EFL classroom are perceived differently by the administrator, teachers and learners, and how these discrepant points of view may affect learners in the process of classroom oral participation. This paper challenges the traditional approach of exploring learners' passive oral behaviors at the level of learners and teachers or based on the observation of interaction between them in a classroom setting. The findings of the study provide insight into ways that positive Communities of Practice can support learners' English oral participation in EFL classrooms.

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1. Introduction

In countries where English is not the dominant language, classroom learning plays a critical role for English learning as learners may have few opportunities to use the language outside the classroom. Oral classroom tasks are a major component of English language instruction, and participation in these tasks is crucial for improvement of speaking skills. Language learning is enhanced when the level of interaction rises (Kang, 2005). In consideration of this influence, various scholars have studied learners' levels of participation in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) classrooms and have attempted to tease out the influences that inhibit learners' active participation in oral language tasks (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Pomerantz, 2001; Zarrinabadi, 2014).

To date, the research on Chinese college students' oral English participation has consisted primarily of two approaches: interviewing the learners and teachers, and observing their verbal interactions during classes (Cao, 2011; Liu, 2005; Peng, 2012). Far less researched is how learners' communication behaviors are impacted by the educational context as a whole. Recent Chinese English education reform has emphasized two major paradigm shifts: from teacher-directed to more student-centered approaches and from a focus on reading and grammar to an emphasis on effective communication in English. This

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has created numerous challenges for administrators and teachers in relation to pedagogical views, educational practices and policy compliance. The purpose of this study is to explore factors influencing learners' participation in EFL classroom oral tasks by studying the issue from the multiple perspectives of three stakeholders in the process; namely, the administrator, teachers and learners.

2. Second language learners' participation in English classroom communication

Research indicates that second language (L2) learners' willingness to communicate in English is mediated by a multitude of situational and personal factors (Kang, 2005; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). The challenges learners may encounter go beyond linguistic proficiencies. Variables within the learners include communication confidence, learner beliefs, learning motivation, investment in English learning, personality factors, affective factors and international posture (Kang, 2005; Norton, 2000; Yashima, 2002). Contextual variables include classroom context and cultural-educational factors (Peng, 2012; Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

Learners' use of English in spoken communication has become an area of widespread interest in L2 education. Nevertheless, the influence of educational policies at the institutional level and pedagogical views at the teacher level in shaping the holistic learning context has been underrepresented in existing research on this topic. The underlying premise of this research is that, in order to better understand EFL teaching and learning, it is necessary to take the overall contextual situation of learners into account (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). To that end, the conceptual framework used to guide the study is the Community of practice (CoP).

3. The community of practice framework

In educational research, Community of Practice theory has been used in the investigation of members' access to and engagement in a specific educational setting (Achugar, 2009; Hansen-Thomas, 2005). Yet in L2 research, in which engagement and participation are indispensable themes, CoP theory has had little impact (Zhou, 2011a). CoP theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework of the present study, for two reasons. First of all, the theory emphasizes participation and social interaction as fundamental tools in the construction of knowledge. Second, the theory approaches learning as a process of transition from legitimate but peripheral participation to full participation within a community. This study contributes to both the understanding of the L2 field and the development of CoP theory by applying CoP theory specifically to the L2 educational context.

Based on CoP theory, a dual CoP framework (Fig. 1) is designed to suit the research context and the objectives of this study. This framework consists of two circles, representing the teaching CoP and the learner CoP. The teaching CoP comprises two dimensions: the administrative dimension and the teacher dimension, while the learner CoP is comprised of the students.

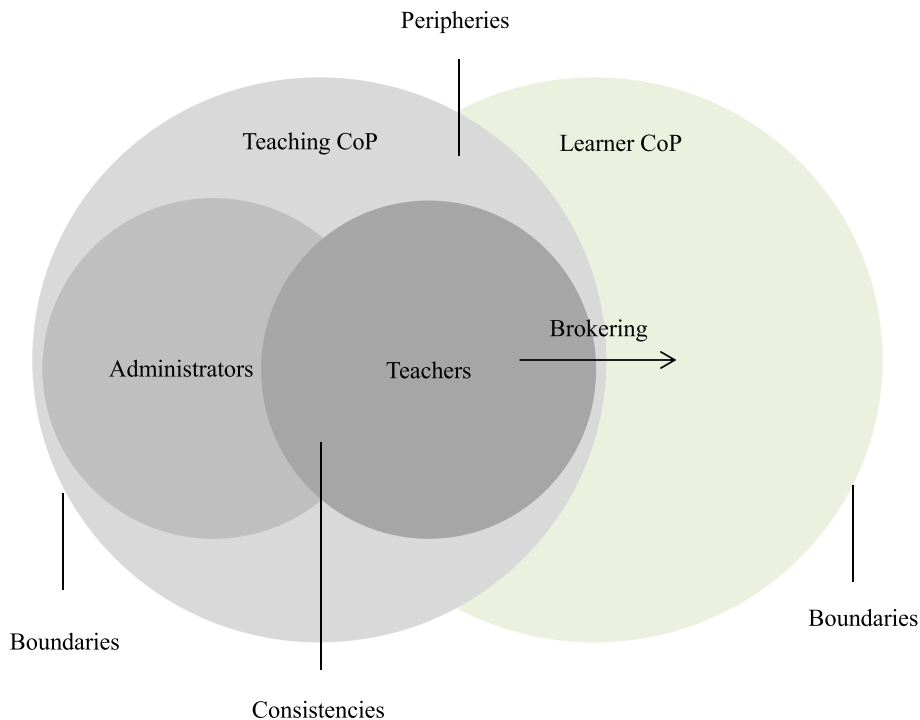


Fig. 1. A dual-CoP framework for analyzing the perspectives of the administrator, teachers and students in the EFL CoPs.

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