Chapter 5
Effects of an E-Learning Platform for EFL Chinese Learners

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ABSTRACT
As English has been increasingly recognized as one of the influential factors for China in taking parts in global community, students and Chinese professionals need to participate in international seminars and conferences, and internationally collaborate with academics through the lingua franca, English. Hence, being able to speak intelligible English has unavoidably become a necessity, especially for Chinese university students. The purpose of this chapter focuses on the implementation of constructive role plays (CRP) via the NHCE e-learning in learning English as a foreign language classes. This chapter exploits quantitative and qualitative methods such as pretest, post-test, student questionnaires and student role play recording analysis to collect data to demonstrate the effectiveness of CRP on Chinese university students’ spoken English development. Results showed that there was a significant increase in the students’ speaking proficiency for the experimental group as compared to the control group. The results also indicated that CRP has been highly successful as an effective aid in improving EFL students’ speaking. The NHCE e-learning platform can provide a motivating environment for L2 students to practice spoken English. However, the empirical results showed that the use of online audio chat facility to perform the CRP may make some students feel anxious, due to its synchronized nature. This suggests that its use should be carefully considered in relation to divergent groups of learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, English speaking has become ever more important in people’s daily lives especially in the international arena. However, it is very difficult for Chinese students to speak with other people in English effectively. The term ‘dumb English’ used to describe Chinese students’ inability to communicate in English in the 1980s and 1990s (Hu, 1988; Weng, 1996) is still used today to describe students’ English learning in China, especially in Chinese universities.

Computer assisted language learning (CALL) has been suggested as one plausible way of improving college English learning and teaching curriculum in China. The Chinese College English Curriculum recommends that computer-assisted language learning should utilize a task-based language learning and teaching approach and be based on constructivism in college English learning and teaching (as cited in Xu, 2007, College English Curriculum Requirements, pp. 29-30). However, it is not clear exactly how e-learning can be employed to promote the development of the speaking skill in the College English curriculum.

At the College English Department of Guizhou University, the New Horizon College English E-learning, the only e-learning platform among universities in Guizhou province, was implemented since 2004. New Horizon College English (henceforth, NHCE) e-learning offers online computer laboratory practice based on the NHCE textbooks. Because the learning activities are online, students are able to engage in self-study activities at any time of their choosing. Moreover, it can also be used in a traditional classroom setting to supplement both EFL instruction and learning (Xu, 2007).

However, the existing NHCE e-learning does not seem to be an adequate platform to develop EFL learners’ speaking skills in English. An evaluation of NHCE e-learning platform revealed that activities contained in the NHCE e-learning are behavioristic in nature especially in the role play section (Wang & Wang, 2005). These role plays are usually teacher driven with objectives pre-determined by the content of the textbook. Speaking activities involved students role-playing designated roles by mechanically repeating language used by the roles through reading pre-set scripts.

Though the NHCE e-learning materials are conducted through advanced computer technology, the approach the learning materials take is more akin to audiolingualism than the task-based approach based on constructivism suggested by the College English Curriculum Requirements. Research on the extensive implementation of NHCE e-learning for college English classes further revealed that students who finished the repetitive role plays did not improve their spoken English (He & Zhong, 2006). Further questionnaire administered by the research team at Guizhou University on the use of NHCE e-learning platform showed that 50.33% of the students (N=300) reported that they learned little from the existing NHCE e-learning in their speaking classes. 43.83% of the students also felt that they were bored while doing the speaking activities on the e-learning platform.

Since Guizhou University spent a great deal of money implementing the NHCE E-learning platform, it is not economically viable to simply abandon the system. In this chapter, we would like to present research that investigates whether it is possible to enhance the role plays on the NHCE e-learning platform through ‘constructive role plays’ (CRP).

‘Constructive role plays’ are role plays based on the principles of constructivism. Four epistemological assumptions are at the heart of what is referred to as “constructivist learning.” (taken from http://www.prainbow.com/cld/cldp.html)

1. Knowledge is physically constructed by learners who are involved in active learning.