The Construction of a Learning-Oriented Speaking Assessment Model in College English Based on the Online Diagnostic Assessment

Hua Dai*

Prospect College, Chongqing College of Mobile Communication, Chongqing 401120, China

***Corresponding author:** Hua Dai, superviola@qq.com

Abstract: Since language is a tool for communication, proficiency in English communication is a fundamental necessity for talent in the 21st century. However, surveys reveal that most college students at private colleges possess inadequate oral English skills, and what some have learned is "mute English." Therefore, developing their English-speaking skills is another challenge faced by students attending private schools. Online diagnostic assessment methods are growing globally with the use of technology. UDig diagnostic assessment system is one of the online English diagnostic assessment platforms currently being widely used in China. Therefore, the present work is conducted to investigate and conduct an oral English learning-oriented assessment model in college English using the online diagnostic assessment. With the research result, it is hoped that the study could provide useful information for improving UDig system and make a better use of it in college oral English learning and teaching.

Keywords: Oral English assessment; Diagnostic assessment; UDig system; Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA)

1. Introduction

There have been significant changes to the global economy and international order, which have raised new standards for the development of global talent. In October 2020, the Ministry of Education released the Guide to Teaching English in Universities (also known as the Guide 2020 Edition) in response to the new circumstances and demands of the development of higher education in China [1]. It emphasizes that English instruction in colleges and universities should foster students' aptitude for applying the language, be grounded in the real world, and work to improve students' communicative competence. According to a survey, however, the primary causes of college students' poor speaking skills among the four competencies (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) are the absence of a language communication environment, undiversified assessment, and students taking CET-4 or CET-6 (College English Test Band 4 or 6) as their main purpose of learning English [2]. Teachers also encounter the difficulty of students being reluctant to speak up during class and lacking the motivation to engage in speaking activities [3]. The status quo of "mute English" is even more evident in private

("民办" *minban*) education institutions, which are those that are managed by businesses or other organizations. The majority of students find it challenging to communicate effectively in English in the classroom, which inevitably makes it difficult for them to meet the requirements of employers for foreign language speaking skills after graduation. Secondly, the effectiveness of speaking classroom instruction is impacted by the lack of opportunities for speaking practice in traditional university curricula, which prevents teachers from conducting appropriate teaching evaluations [4]. Based on the aforementioned elements, some instructors and students disregard the development of oral English skills in college English classes; instructors devote less time to oral instruction in the classroom; and students are too shy or self-conscious to speak up in class or to elaborate on their opinions in English class. Furthermore, non-English majors at private colleges are unable to perform better in oral learning because they did not prioritize oral English in high school, had little interest in oral communication, gave up easily when encountering difficulties, and lacked strong motivation [5]. Thus, one of the main goals of the current reform of college English teaching in private colleges is to effectively promote students' oral English level in order to enhance students' language proficiency and communicative competence. As a result, it is necessary to investigate the learning-oriented evaluation model of college English speaking.

Currently, diagnostic assessments and English instruction are the main research objects in most domestic and international studies. However, there are few research findings about constructing an oral English learning-oriented assessment model in private colleges in southwest China, or about modifying speaking assessment tasks based on diagnostic assessment feedback to fulfill the goal of promoting learning. Therefore, the current research has some innovative value in terms of both the research field and the research content.

2. Literature review

2.1. Diagnostic assessment

Assessment is a tool for evaluating the efficacy of English language teaching and serves multiple goals: it can be used to measure students' proficiency in English, to place students at the appropriate course level, or to diagnose students' language strengths and weaknesses [6]. One type of assessment is known as diagnostic assessment, which consists of a series of diagnostic procedures used to determine the knowledge and skill gaps that learners have in the target domain [7]. The field of language assessment has made extensive use of diagnostic evaluation in recent years [8]. Language instructors may have always known that identifying their students' strengths and weaknesses at the outset of a foreign language course would, in theory, greatly aid them in customizing instruction to meet the needs of individual students, or at the very least, assist them in developing lesson plans that are appropriate for the general skill levels of the class [9]. One common issue is that, although students' strengths and weaknesses may become clear as they finish their regular coursework over the course of the semester, it tends to be too late to make significant progress by the time instructors learn what the students truly need [10]. For this reason, more and more foreign language experts started highlighting the significance of diagnostic assessment as it concentrates on areas of weakness that require remediation in subsequent instruction.

According to Brown and Abeywickrama, the goals of diagnostic assessments are to evaluate students' language proficiency, assist students in identifying language issues that they may be having, and give them more specific information to help them become more proficient language users [11]. The majority of Chinese academics have confirmed the significance of diagnostic assessment feedback in the efficacy of teaching foreign languages. For instance, Wu specifically noted that teachers' integration of diagnostic assessment with classroom instruction can serve as a foundation for decisions made about classroom instruction [12]; Jia and Huang have summarized the roles, classification, and characteristics of diagnostic assessments and carried out

an investigation on the use of online diagnostic assessments, emphasizing the usefulness of their customized diagnostic and feedback features in augmenting the development of students' proficiency [13].

2.2. Online diagnostic assessment in English teaching and learning and UDig

Online diagnostic language assessment systems are being created all over the world as a result of the availability of targeted score reports, automated grading, and feedback in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) language assessments due to technological advancements [14]. In the Chinese mainland, Chinese academics have made impressive strides in the application of cognitive diagnosis technology to language assessment [15]. Among them, UDig is one of the potential online diagnostic language assessment systems in the Chinese mainland.

The UDig (College Edition) used in this research is an online English diagnostic system led by authoritative experts in the field of English language testing and independently developed by the Foreign Studies Research Institute (FSRI) to serve teachers and students in colleges and universities. The system takes the Chinese English Proficiency Scale (hereinafter referred to as the Scale) as the standard, adheres to the concept of assessment for/as learning, and provides online diagnostic assessment for college students at Level 4 to Level 7 of the Scale, aiming at helping college students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own English proficiency, and to determine the starting point and goal of their learning (English Diagnostic Assessment and Teaching Research in Colleges and Universities). According to Lu's study, instructors and students can identify issues with English instruction in real time by using the intelligent diagnostic assessment system (UDig), which enables them to modify their lesson plans and instructional strategies [16].

2.3. Learning-oriented assessment (LOA)

Since the 1980s, the concept of "student-centered" teaching and learning has been promoted by a wide range of education scholars, and classroom assessment has gone through two transformations, one being the emergence of assessment for learning and the other being the shift from being an assessment of learning to assessment for learning [17]. In recent years, with the increasing value of learning-oriented assessment in teaching and learning, scholars have made some preliminary explorations on how to use learning-oriented assessment theory in teaching practice.

Though many learning-oriented assessment frameworks have been put forth to date, the three most well-known groups of researchers' frameworks are as follows: Carless' framework concentrates on how learning tasks and assessment tasks can be created, as well as how learners can participate in assessment activities [18]; the framework that Purpura and Turner provided highlights the various but connected dimensions on which evaluations can be conducted, which is mostly used for in-class observation [19]; the design of learning and assessment tasks as well as the importance of the knowledge acquired from them are the main goals of the approach by Jones *et al.* [20].

Therefore, in order to develop an assessment model for speaking that is suitable for college English courses, more research must be done based on current teaching practices. In this study, the learning-oriented oral assessment model was developed based on the learning-oriented assessment frameworks mentioned above. The three main components of this model are "learning tasks as assessing tasks," "development of assessing skills in learners," and "student engagement with feedback." The conceptual framework of this study was chosen to include these three elements since they appear to focus similarly on the congruence between learning tasks and assessing tasks and the engagement in assessment procedures that enhance the meaning of evaluation.

3. Research questions

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) Do diagnostic assessments help private college English language learners communicate more effectively?

(2) How can diagnostic assessment and learning-oriented assessment be effectively integrated to improve students' English-speaking skills?

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and setting

The study was conducted in a compulsory 16-week college English course for sophomore students with non-English majors in a private college. The participants in this study were sophomore students in a private college. For the study, they are taught New Horizontal College English Book 3 of Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. The number of students was 22 in the control class and 23 in the experimental class. The same textbook and course design had been employed for both classes. The only difference was that the online diagnostic assessment was used in the experimental class [21].

4.2. Procedure

This research study sought to locate and evaluate the application of the learning-oriented speaking assessment model in teaching college English to non-English major students. The purpose was to improve the effectiveness of student's speaking skills based on the online diagnostic assessment feedback. By analyzing diagnostic reports, we draw conclusions about the state of college students' oral learning in private colleges. The action plan developed runs through the academic year 2022–2023 for teaching college English, with the goal of enhancing students' English speaking skills and motivating them to use their diagnostic assessment results as a tool for independent learning. Simultaneously, teachers can modify the assessment framework to enhance students' oral communication skills by utilizing diagnostic assessment results.

The plan is illustrated as follows:

Stage One: To learn about students' proficiency in speaking techniques and the challenges and barriers they have in enhancing their speaking skills, a questionnaire survey is administered at the beginning of the first semester. In addition, the instructor asks the students to complete a diagnostic assessment via the UDig platform.

Stage Two: A learning-oriented oral assessment model is used in the second semester. The specific assessment (**Table 1**) follows the three main principles mentioned earlier: "Learning tasks as assessing tasks," "development of assessing skills in learners," and "student engagement with feedback."

Table 1. Assessment for college English course

Assessment	Percentage	Tasks
Assessment 1	10%	Online diagnostic assessment (three times a semester)
Assessment 2	20%	Classroom participation: Speaking discussion
Assessment 3	20%	Oral presentation
Assessment 4	25%	Completion of the unit project and report in the class
Assessment 5	25%	Practice activity beyond the classroom: Making a video on a given topic dubbed in English, taking part in an English competition, joining an English club, etc.

Stage Three: After an interview with a subset of students, the action plan is reflected, summarized, and modified.

4.3. Data collection instruments

There were three data collection instruments in the present study, all of which were constructed, validated, and revised prior to actual data collection. The three data collection instruments are as follows:

(1) Questionnaire: The purpose of the College English Speaking Strategies Questionnaire is to gather basic information about the speaking situations of current college students. The questionnaire was in self-assessment form and included questions about the students' perceptions of their own speaking levels, their opinions about speaking, the purpose of speaking, barriers they faced while learning to speak, whether or not they have taken the initiative to participate in speaking competitions outside of the classroom, and other related topics. The questionnaires were distributed to 69 participants, and 69 legitimate answer sheets were retrieved. Since the questionnaires were completed by secret ballot, the results were unbiased and reliable.

(2) Diagnostic assessments: During this phase, the diagnostic assessment was administered three times a semester in the experimental class (at the start, middle, and end of the semester) using the UDig online test platform. The speaking level trajectory of the students was promptly recorded. The speaking part of the test took 30 minutes, containing reading aloud, retelling, picture description, and making a speech.

(3) Sample interviews: Some students in the experimental class were selected for interviews to further explore the role and impact of the oral evaluation model on students' learning promotion from the students' perspective [22].

5. Results

According to the results of the questionnaire, only 42% of students believe they can set realistic speaking goals for themselves, while 53.5% of them can clearly understand the requirements of English speaking tasks; 31.8% can choose the appropriate words for their oral expressions based on the topic; 33.3% can promptly correct pronunciation errors; 23.1% can correct grammatical errors; and 23.1% can adjust their grammar by using appropriate intonation, sentence structures, rephrasing sentences based on the response of others. It is noteworthy that less than half of the students ask their English teachers for advice on the difficulties they face when learning to speak English.

The experimental data (the data on speaking level provided by UDig) of two classes were analyzed, Class 2 is the experimental class and Class 3 is the control class. Overall, students gradually improved in their English speaking level as can be indicated from **Tables 2** and **3**. After receiving the results of the UDig Speaking Test, students can focus on improving their areas of weakness, which include mispronounced words when reading aloud, unclear descriptions of visuals, and illogical speaking. The teacher from Class 3 continued to teach in the traditional ways, whereas only the teacher from Class 2 made modifications to their teaching methods. Additionally, the teacher from Class 2 planned lessons based on suggestions from the diagnostic assessment results.

Table 2. Online diagnostic results of Class 2 for the first semester from year 2022–2023

Level	1st test (number of people)	2nd test (number of people)	3rd test (number of people)
CSE4	9	16	6
CSE5	5	2	5
CSE6	1	4	8

Table 3. Online diagnostic results of Class 3 for the first semester from year 2022–2023

Level	1st test (number of people)	2nd test (number of people)	3rd test (number of people)
CSE4	17	22	9
CSE5	3	0	8
CSE6	0	1	6

In the third phase of the study, stratified sampling was also conducted in the experimental class and four students were selected for interview based on the diagnostic results of these four students for the academic year 2022–2023 taken from UDig report. It can be seen from the diagnostic trajectories of these four students that three of them have improved their speaking level, two of them have improved faster, and one of them has decreased her speaking level.

Based on the interview recordings, all four students believed that, following a semester of study, their speaking had improved and that the UDig test results were somewhat accurate. In response to the diagnostic report provided by UDig, all four students stated that they had not implemented the corresponding strategies to improve their speaking level as they stated that their primary motivation for studying English was to pass the CET-4 or CET-6 (a national English test for non-English majors).

6. Discussion

The issues with students' English-speaking learning have been identified by an analysis of the questionnaire results on speaking strategies. However, students are not motivated to improve oral English in private colleges, which makes it impossible for them to guarantee the impact of oral English learning. Instead, their primary motivation for improving their oral English is to pass the English proficiency test, such as CET-4 or CET-6. In this situation, teachers must support and encourage students to take the initiative to engage in the learning process while providing them with the direction and assistance they need to learn more effectively and achieve higher learning objectives. Following the implementation of the learning-oriented assessment system, teachers can leverage digital platforms and tools to track students' progress and offer feedback to help them optimize their teaching strategies. Additionally, they can create assessment tasks based on diagnostic assessment results, which will foster students' enthusiasm and interest in oral learning, ultimately fostering their capacity for self-learning. In order to meet the learning objectives, students can be motivated to participate in the assessment process by using an assessment model that encourages them to do so. Furthermore, students can use the timely diagnostic feedback they receive to reflect on their current learning problems and determine the best course of action for their next learning step. This allows them to tailor the learning progress and content to suit their individual needs, which increases learning efficiency.

7. Reflection and conclusion

This research lasted for three phases and generally achieved the expected goals. Through the UDig diagnostic results, students were able to recognize their own speaking deficiencies, and teachers were able to use the results to reflect on the teaching process, modify their lesson plans, and develop a learning-oriented speaking assessment model to better support students' speaking learning outcomes. However, there is still room for improvement in this paradigm of speech promotion and assessment. Teachers will face issues in the future related to further stratified teaching, assisting students in applying the diagnostic results, and motivating students to study continuously.

Regarding the use of diagnostic tools, this study demonstrates that UDig is a useful tool for enhancing students' oral competency; however, more investigation is required to guarantee that students can effectively complete the teacher's facilitation evaluation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Brown HD, Abeywickrama P, 2004, Language Assessment. Principles and Classroom Practices, Pearson Education, White Plains, NY.

[2] Carless D, 2007, Learning-Oriented Assessment: Conceptual Bases and Practical Implications. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 44(1): 57–66.

[3] Carless D, 2015, Exploring Learning-Oriented Assessment Processes. Higher Education, 2015(69): 963–976.

[4] Chen YH, Yang XL, 2018, Research on Diagnostic Test of College English Speaking. Journal of Chengdu Normal University, 34(05): 28–31.

[5] Chen H, Zhao G, 2013, Application of Cognitive Diagnosis: A New Stage of Language Testing Research. Foreign Language Testing and Teaching, 2013(2): 1–9.

[6] Du W, Ma X, 2018, Construction of English Reading Diagnostic Model Based on Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2018(1): 74–88.

[7] Gao Y, 2022, An Investigation into EFL Learners' Evaluation of the On-Line Diagnostic Assessment: The Case of UDig Reading Test, 2022 3rd International Conference on Modern Education and Information Management (ICMEIM 2022). Atlantis Press, Chengdu, China, 878–885.

[8] Gebril A, Brown GT, 2019, Quality of Feedback in TESOL: A Learning-Oriented Assessment Perspective, Quality in TESOL and Teacher Education, Routledge, London, 131–139.

[9] Jones N, Saville N, Salamoura A, 2016, Learning Oriented Assessment (Vol. 45), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[10] Lee YW, Sawaki Y, 2009, Cognitive Diagnosis Approaches to Language Assessment: An Overview. Language Assessment Quarterly, 6(3): 172–189.

[11] Liu XY, 2021, The Construction of University English Speaking Teaching Mode Based on Diagnostic Language Assessment. Modern English, 2021(06): 97–99.

[12] Lu DM, 2021, Innovation of University English Hybrid Teaching Mode Based on UDig Intelligent Diagnostic Assessment System. Journal of Heihe University, 2021(10): 108–109 + 143.

[13] Mo YG, 2002, The Application of Diagnostic Test in English Teaching. Education Science Research, 2002(12): 47–49.

[14] Jia TQ, Huang LY, 2020, The Design and Implementation of Online Diagnostic Test in English. English Language Learning, 2020(11): 8–14.

[15] Purpura JE, Turner CE, 2014, A Learning-Oriented Assessment Approach to Understanding the Complexities of Classroom-Based Language Assessment. Roundtable on Learning-Oriented Assessment in Language Classrooms and Large-Scale Contexts.

[16] Reed D, 2006, Diagnostic Assessment in Language Teaching and Learning. Clear News, 10(2): 1–5.

[17] Tao YW, Tao YY, 2019, Research on the Evaluation of Blended Learning in Higher Education Oriented to Promote Learning. Research on Education and Teaching, 33(02): 37–47.

[18] Viengsang R, Wasanasomsithi P, 2022, Effects of a Learning-Oriented Reading Assessment Model on Thai Undergraduate Students' Reading Ability. LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network, 15(1): 709–747.

[19] Wicking P, 2022, Learning-Oriented Assessment in an International Virtual Exchange, Second Language Teaching and Learning Through Virtual Exchange, De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, Boston, 9–34.

[20] Wu ZM, 2017, Diagnostic Language Assessment Provides a Basis for Classroom Teaching Decisions. English Learning, 2017(8): 20–25.

[21] Zhang J, 2021, The Effective Use of Diagnostic Assessment in College English Teaching. Modern English, 2021(02): 46–48.

[22] Zeng W, Huang F, Yu L, et al., 2018, Towards a Learning-Oriented Assessment to Improve Students' Learning—A Critical Review of Literature. Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 2018(30): 211–250.