

Examining the Internet-Based Free Talk in College English Classes from the Motivation Perspective

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Abstract: Free Talk is recognized as an effective approach to teaching college English in China to improve students' English speaking. With the popularity of Internet around the world, the Internet-based Free Talk demonstrates more advantages in motivating students to engage in English learning. In this paper, the author compares the main features of the Internet-based Free Talk with the five components of the MUSIC Model of Motivation synthesized from current research and theory in the field of motivation. Furthermore, the author illustrates how Internet facilitates Free Talk through online writing service system and online QQ community. The comparison reveals that the success of the Internet-based Free Talk is consistent with the key motivation principles. This paper indicates that professors and researchers in higher education could design and evaluate their instruction according to the components of the MUSIC model of motivation.

Key words: The Internet-based Free Talk; college English class; the MUSIC model of motivation

1 Introduction

Free Talk is recognized as an effective approach to college English classes in China to improve students' English speaking. With the popularity of Internet around the world, the Internet-based Free Talk demonstrates more advantages in motivating students to engage in English learning. The main features of the Internet-based Free Talk program include: two or three students are the focus in class as active speakers during the first few minutes of the class period; the Free Talk topics are based on a survey regarding students' background such as hometown, hobbies, ideal scenic places, the short term goal and the long term goal, teachers allow students to make decisions on the topics; an online writing service system and an online QQ community are provided for the writing and video of the Free Talk; the multiple choice of the prescribed higher level reading materials for the Free Talk.

From the interviews with the students participated in the Internet-based Free Talk, the author found that students are interested in such an activity in their English learning process. And as a result students are motivated to engage in their college English courses. The purpose of this research is to identify to what extent the Internet-based Free Talk program relates to the motivation principles. From this comparison the author hopes that professors and researchers in higher education can apply such principles to their instructional design to improve student motivation and engagement.

In the realm of educational psychology, educators and researchers have conducted research on academic motivation since the 1940s [1]. Up to now, there are a lot of motivation theories such as the self-determination theory [2][3], the self-efficacy theory[4], the expectancy-value theory[5][6], the four-phase interest theory[7]and theories concerning interpersonal relationship[8][9]. Instructors outside the motivation field are usually overwhelmed by these terms and have difficulty in implementing them in their classes. Based on such problems, Jones synthesized the current research and theories of motivation, grouped them into five components, and called them the MUSIC model of motivation[10].

MUSIC is an acronym of the key principles of motivation related to eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest and Caring. Jones explains that students will be more motivated when they perceive that: (1) they have control over the coursework, (2) the content is useful for their short-term or long-term goals, (3) they can be successful if they put forth appropriate effort, (4) they are interest in the content and class activities, and (5) they feel cared for by teachers and peers in the learning environment[10][11]. Research has shown that the MUSIC model components are correlated, yet distinct in samples of elementary schools [12], secondary and middle schools [13] and postsecondary schools [14][15].The main body of this paper compares the Internet-based Free Talk program with the five components of the MUSIC model. Then we discuss how it is possible for college professors to implement the

MUSIC model in the Internet environment to increase their students' motivation and engagement.

2 Comparing the Internet-Based Free Talk to the music model

2.1 Students are the Focus of Free Talk who have Opportunities to Choose topics and Make Decisions.

The component of empowerment in the MUSIC model refers to the extent to which students feel that they have control over some parts of their coursework [11]. This component is mainly based on the self-determination theory and the individuals' need for autonomy[2][3]. Deci and Ryan held that if individuals have choices toward a task, they will be more likely to spontaneously engage in an activity that interests them[2]. They also argued that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are a human's innate psychological needs[2]. Therefore, it will be possible for instructors to empower their students when they provide students with a variety of opportunities regarding an assignment and allow them to make decisions [16].

In the Internet-based Free Talk program, students are always the focus in the first few minutes in the English class period and teachers provide them with opportunities of the topics and allow them to make decisions. First, at the very beginning of the class in the new semester, the college English teacher gives students an assignment of free talk and asks each of them to give a one minute free talk in front of the class. During each class period, there will be two or three students for the free talk in the first few minutes of the class. Second, the teacher provides students with a list of topics that students can choose one or two as their free talk topics. Third, the students have the power to decide when to give a free talk in class. In other words, students are not forced to give a free talk at a prescribed time. All of these enhance students' sense of empowerment because they have control over the topic and they are able to make decision when they will give the free talk. At the



Fig. 1 The first year college students are discussing the list of the topics for their free talk.



Fig. 2 The first year college student is presenting her free talk

same time, these strategies motivate students in respect to other components of the MUSIC model such as interest, success, and usefulness. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the first year college students are discussing the list of the topics with their classmates and then choose one as their own free talk topic.

2.2 The Usefulness of the Free Talk for Students' English proficiency.

The component of usefulness in the MUSIC model means that instructors use strategies to help students understand why the course they are learning is useful for their short- and long-term goals [11]. This component is consistent with the future time perspective theory and the expectancy-value theory. The former theory argues that students will be more motivated if they could see that their present task or coursework are useful for their future goals [17]. The latter theory holds that if students can see the values of a task or the coursework, they will put forth more effort and persistence on the task or the coursework [6]. Jones holds that instructors should explain the usefulness of the course to students' daily lives or help students to see the usefulness of the content by designing some activities themselves [11]

In the Internet-based Free Talk program, the teacher uses three strategies to demonstrate the usefulness of the free talk activities. The fundamental strategy is that the teacher illustrates the video samples of English interview programs in class at the very beginning of the semester. The teacher also picks up a small amount of the genuine conversation scripts from the National College English Test Band Four (CET 4). After the demonstration of these samples, the teacher uploads them to the online QQ community built up specifically for the Free Talk program. In so doing, students can apparently see the

usefulness of the free talk both for their English speaking proficiency and for the certificate contributing to their long-term goal. Second, the teacher provide students with the opportunities of free talk after class with foreign experts on campus. Students can go and talk with the foreign experts before or after their free talk in class. Third, the teacher invites the upper class students from the same campus as guest presenters to class who have high English speaking proficiency and share their experience of the usefulness of English speaking for graduate exam or job hunting. The teacher uploads the upper class students' free talk text to the online QQ community in case the students want to read them again after the guests' presentation. The English interview videos and the CET 4 conversations, the free talk with the foreign experts, and the guest presenters help the students realize the usefulness of the Free Talk program.

2.3 The Success that Students can Perceive When They Prepare and Present their Free Talk.

The success component in the MUSIC model indicates that students are more likely to put forth more time and effort if they believe they can succeed in their coursework [10][11]. This component is based on the self-efficacy theory [4] and the expectancy of success aspect of the expectancy-value theory [6]. These two theories hold that an individual's beliefs of their capabilities to be successful in a task decide to what extent they will persist, put forth time and effort, and choose cognitive self-regulation strategies [4][6]. Jones also argued that it is necessary for the instructors to help students believe that they can succeed if they put forth the effort required[11]. One implication of the success component is that teachers should consider students' prior knowledge and connect the difficulty level of the class activities and assignments with students' existing capabilities; another implication is that teachers should regularly provide students with honest and specific feedback [11].

The college English teacher in the Internet-based Free Talk program improves students' sense of success by providing the different level topics for the free talk, the quick response to students' questions, the regular feedback on students' free talk text, and the uploading of the individual's free talk video to the online QQ community. In the first college semester, the teacher provides students with the lower level daily life topics such as the student's hometown, hobbies, favorite food, best friend, and the ideal scenic places around the world. Then the teacher provides students with the higher level topics derived from the book entitled *A concise course of American literature*. For example, students will talk about his or her favorite American writer based the list of the writers in the book. In this way the students can perceive their success in speaking and writing. Second, the teacher asks the student who will give a free talk the next day to submit his or her free talk text to the online writing service system and then revise the text until there is no mistake about grammar or spelling. Therefore, when the student is giving a free talk in class, the text on

the big screen in the front of the class will be one without any mistake. The teacher is approachable and will praise the students online or offline when students correct the mistakes in their free talk text. During the Free Talk presentation, both teacher and peers listen to the student's free talk attentively. Teachers and peers will applaud when the individual's free talk is over. In addition, the teacher records the student's free talk performance as video in class and then upload the video to the online QQ community in a few hours after class. All these strategies will enhance students' sense of success and lead students to believe that they can succeed if they put forth appropriate time and effort on the free talk assignment.

2.4 The Interest that Students can Perceive from the Free Talk Program.

The interest component in the MUSIC model means both the content and the class activities should interest students and teachers should help students to enjoy their learning experiences[11]. This component is consistent with Hidi and Renninger's interest theory and they state that "the potential for interest is in the person but the content and the environment define the direction of interest and contribute to its development" (p. 112) [7]. Teachers can increase students' interest by using novelty and various instructional activities to catch and hold student attention[11].

The Internet-based Free Talk program interests students in many ways. First, students have choice about what to talk in class. In contrast to the prescribed textbook, the topics of the Free Talk are interesting. Second, the teacher adds relevant pictures or words to students' free talk text before the free talk time, and then show the revised text in class. These pictures or words provide students with more interests about the free talk. Third, the teacher uploads the relevant movies based on American literature to the online QQ community, and then students can enjoy them to deepen their understanding of the American writers and their novels, poems, or fictions. In contrast to the paper-and-pen test, the free talk, a part of students' class presentation score, is more interesting due to the colorful pictures, vivid movies, and the diversity of topics.

2.5 The Caring that Students can Perceive from Teachers and Peers.

The component of caring in the MUSIC model indicates that students will be more motivated when they believe that the teachers and peers care about their learning and about them as a person [11]. This component is mainly derived from research in attachment, relatedness, caring, and sense of community [2][18]. Bergin and Bergin and Wentzel argue that students tend to be more active in their coursework and perform better academically when they have close relationships with their teachers and

classmates[18][19]. Noddings holds that besides academic achievement, the main aim of education should also include the moral perspective fostering students to be “competent, caring, loving and lovable” (p. ix)[18]. One implication is that teachers should be available to students when they need help. Another implication is that teachers should respect students and ensure that students in the class respect one another [11]

The Internet-based Free Talk program demonstrates four aspects of caring between the teacher and the students and among the peers. First, at the very beginning of the semester, the teacher builds up two online communities; one is the online community of the writing service system and the other is online QQ community. In the online writing system, the teacher provides students with the free talk writing assignment and asks students to upload and revise their free talk text based on the guidance of the writing service system. The teacher can assign the students to pair work or three to five peers group work randomly in this community so that the peers can help each other and witness each other's progress. The teacher is approachable when students meet problems that the writing system cannot solve. Second, in the online QQ community, all the students upload their revised free talk text so that each of them can share their text with each other. After the free talk presentation in class, the teacher will upload the free talker's video to the QQ community. The teacher and some of the other students send symbolic pictures such as applause, gifts, and smile faces to the free talkers in the community. Also, some students upload the relevant picture and videos to the QQ community. Third, during the free talk period in class, both the teacher and the students listen to the free talk attentively. After the free talk, the teacher and the students applauds the free talker's good job and the teacher usually spends a few seconds commenting the free talk briefly. In addition, the teacher is available to students inside and outside the two communities. For example, students can also send messages to the teacher via WeChat or QQ personally. The teacher gives quick, honest and specific feedback to the students whenever they need help.

3 CONCLUSION

This paper provides evidence that the Internet-based Free Talk program is consistent with current motivation research and theory. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates how the MUSIC model of motivation serves as a lens examining the effectiveness of the Internet-based Free Talk program from five key components (empowerment, usefulness, success, interest, and caring). In addition, the online writing service system and the online QQ community play an important role in promoting the power of the Free Talk program. This paper concludes that the Internet-based Free Talk program is successful in college English classes in China because of the following reasons. It empowers students by providing a lot of opportunities and decision making

regarding free talk topics, when and with whom to discuss and give the free talk. The various interview videos, the conversations in the listening section of the CET 4 and the guest presentations by the upper class students contribute to students' enhanced sense of usefulness toward this free talk program; the quick and honest feedback from the teachers and peers, the use of the online writing service system, and the free talk performance in the front of the classroom result in students' strong sense of success. The list of diverse daily life topics and the different writers in the American literature, and the uploaded free talk videos bring a lot of interests to students. Finally, the online communities of writing service system and QQ chatroom provide teachers and students the sense of family because they care about each other both in English learning and their life. The teacher's quick and honest feedback on students' questions strengthens students' sense of caring. As a result, other instructional design programs can use the key components of the MUSIC model of motivation to determine whether the design is consistent with the current motivation research and theory and then the program really motivate students to engage in their learning.

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