



Arousing the College Students' Motivation in Speaking English through Role-Play

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Abstract

English as a tool of communication has been playing an important part in acquiring cultural, scientific and technical knowledge, for collecting worldwide information and carrying out international exchange and cooperation. Improving college students' oral English level has become more and more important. Based on Richard E. Mayer's theory of motivation and the advantages of role-play on the aspect of arousing the motivation of learning, this paper not only explores some of the theories of communicative teaching methods, but also proves the importance of the motivation of learning. Two kinds of English teaching activities for oral English class were designed which are oral English tests and role-play activity. The objective of this research is to arouse the college students' motivation in speaking English. And the project hypothesis is that using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using oral English tests. The researcher divides the students who are the freshmen of Beijing City University into two groups - Target group and the Control group. And the researcher does the research by using observation notes, the questionnaire and the interview data collection methods. Through the four weeks research, it is proved that the students in the Target Group which use role-play activity become more interested in speaking English than the students in the Control Group which use oral English tests. So from the result of this research, we know that in our Chinese university, the teachers can use some communicative classroom activities such as role-play to arouse the students' motivation of English speaking. There are also some limitations of this research for example, because the sample size was small, the results might not be typical; and the time of the research was too short, so maybe there were some unstable data.

Keywords: Motivation, Communicative teaching methods, Oral English test, Role-play

1. Introduction

What should a course in spoken English production prepare a student to do? The intention is, often, that the student should be able to 'express himself' in the target language, to cope with basic interactive skills like exchanging greetings and thanks and apologies, and to express his 'needs'- request information, services etc (Brown & Yule, 2000, p.27). Mayer had also stated, "When students are motivated to learn, they try harder to understand the material and thereby learn more deeply, resulting in better ability to transfer what they have learned to new situations" (Mayer, 2003, p.459). So let the students have the motivation of speaking is very important to English teaching. But nowadays, most college students are passive in oral English learning. They are tired of the traditional methods of teaching English and not interested in reading or just reciting the English texts. Therefore why the students have the low motivation of learning oral English and how to solve this problem become the key points of improving the researcher's English speaking teaching.

The communicative language teaching is a teaching methodology, which requires learners to practice in real situations. The communicative activities are based on the Western humanistic philosophy (Nitko, A. J. & Brookhart, S. M. 2007). One typical classroom activity is role-play. And Littlewood (1981) summarized some of the contributions that communicative activities can make to language learning under four headings: 1. they improve motivation, 2. they provide "whole-task practice", 3. they allow natural learning, 4. they can create a context which supports learning.

From the above theories, the researcher designed this research by using the communicative language teaching method - role plays. This research is chiefly based on the project that the researcher conducted within four weeks' time. And two kinds of English teaching activities for oral English class were designed which are oral English tests and role-play activity. The objective of this research is to arouse the college students' motivation in speaking English. And the project hypothesis is that using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using oral English tests. The researcher divided the students into two groups which was the Target group and the Control group. And she did the research by using observation notes, the questionnaire and the interview data collection methods. The project was implemented and proved that the students in the Target Group which use role-play activity became more interested in speaking English than the students in the Control Group which use oral English tests.

2. Problem Identification and Analysis

2.1 Project problem

Nowadays, most college students are active in the real life but passive in English learning. This phenomenon is obvious with the researcher's students. Most of them have low motivation in English study especially in the classroom of oral English. They are tired of the traditional methods of teaching English and not interested in reading or just reciting the English texts.

The researcher has been teaching English in Beijing City University for more than one year. All of her students are non-English major students. They are fond of showing off themselves in the daily life, but they are passive on the oral English class and have low motivation in speaking English. The researcher had used an oral English test for each week to arouse the students' extrinsic motivation of speaking English, but it had no obvious changes. Because motivation colors and shapes students' involvement in learning and it stimulates feelings that students associate with these experiences (Winne, 1985), why the students have the low motivation of learning oral English and how to solve this problem become the key points of improving the researcher's English speaking teaching. From above the project problem of this research is most college students have low motivation in speaking English.

2.2 Problem analysis

Two analytic methods are used to analyze the project problem. They are cause analysis and observation.

2.2.1 Cause analysis

At this stage, the researcher starts with a list of factors that may contribute to the causes: 1) the teacher's side, 2) the students' side, 3) the classroom activities design.

1) The teacher's side

- a. Because the teacher just graduated from Beijing Foreign Studies University, she must be lack of some special knowledge in English field and teaching experiences.
- b. The teacher always let students read and discuss some dialogues and topics in the text book, but didn't give any related information from real-life.
- c. The teacher took more control of the English speaking class and didn't give students' chance to express themselves freely.

2) The students' side

- a. Some weak students lack confidence in expressing themselves when do the exercises individually.
- b. The levels of English are different among all the students.
- c. Some students are not interested in learning English.
- d. They are freshmen who are about 19 years old, so they have their own opinions and don't like controlled by others.

3) The classroom activities design

- a. Just answer questions one by one. That is boring for the students.
- b. Make up only two big groups with all the students to discuss the topics by using the language in the text book. As a result the more active the top students are the less active the other students are.
- c. Oral English tests for each week made most students too nervous to be afraid of learning oral English.

2.2.2 Observation

At this stage, the researcher observed two oral English classes. One is her colleague's class in the same university; the other is a foreign teacher's class in Beijing Normal University. Then she compared the two classes with her own class, and got several conclusions.

1) Compared with the colleague's oral English class

- a. Different with the researcher's oral English tests for each week, the colleague took a small test on each class. Although the students were serious on her class, the atmosphere of the class was depressing.
- b. Just like the researcher, the colleague used the traditional teaching methods on her class, which made most her students bored.

2) Compared with the foreign teacher's oral English class

- a. Different with the researcher's reading the dialogues one by one on the class, the foreign teacher made all the students into several small groups to do the exercises. And he took role-plays and group discussions as the main classroom activities. All of the students were active on the class, and showed great motivation of doing the exercises.

b. Because the students of the foreign teacher's class were freshmen of Beijing Normal University, their English level maybe different with the researcher's students. But they are the same age.

2.3 Results of problem analysis

After making above analysis, the researcher feels quite strongly that her ineffective design of classroom activities is the primary cause of her students' low motivation in speaking English. So the researcher determined to design a project that can render more effective classroom activities to solve the problem.

3. Project Objective and Hypothesis

3.1 Project objective

The project objective of this research is to arouse the college students' motivation in speaking English.

3.2 Project hypothesis

The project hypothesis is that using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using oral English tests.

4. Project Rationale

The project to arouse college students' motivation in English speaking is designed based on the following theories on the importance of priming the learner's motivation to learn, the advantages of communicative language teaching, and the features of role-play activity.

4.1 The importance of priming the learner's motivation to learn

Motivation is an internal state that initiates and maintains goal-directed behavior. It is an inducement to action (Mayer, 2003, p.460). Mayer had also stated, "When students are motivated to learn, they try harder to understand the material and thereby learn more deeply, resulting in better ability to transfer what they have learned to new situations" (Mayer, 2003, p.459). If the students can use the language for themselves, then they become aware that they have learnt something useful and are encouraged to go on learning: perhaps the most important factor is to keep up motivation in the learning process itself (Shi Zheng, 2006). Many researches in the motivation field proved that there was an inseparable relationship between motivational strength and oral English proficiency. So using what kinds of good methods could help us finish our oral English class excellently was very important to the English teachers.

4.2 The definition and advantages of communicative language teaching

Language does not occur in isolation; it occurs in a situational and social context and is used to express social and functional meanings. The speaker of the language uses his linguistic competence and communicative competence for successful communication. (Gu Yueguo, 1998, p.49). So linguistic activities and communicative activities are both important parts of our English reading curriculum design. The communicative language teaching is a teaching methodology, which requires learners to practice in real situations. The communicative activities are based on the Western humanistic philosophy (Nitko, A. J. & Brookhart, S. M. 2007). One typical classroom activity is role-play.

An English teacher whose name is Shi Zheng did many researches about the communicative language teaching had said in his article:

The communicative approach is an effective teaching method, which helps the students to develop the ability to use a new language practically. The students and teachers should put themselves into the "real" scene. Gradually, they accumulate the perceptual knowledge of English and then develop the sensibility of this language, thus, to achieve the purpose of grasping a language (Shi Zheng, 2006).

Littlewood (1981) summarized some of the contributions that communicative activities can make to language learning under four headings: 1. they improve motivation, 2. they provide "whole-task practice", 3. they allow natural learning, 4. they can create a context which supports learning.

4.3 The features of role-play activity

"Role-playing" is one method of getting the students to imagine they are someone else and play that part (Shi Zheng, 2006). Doing role-play activities is a way to practice, or rehearse, situations that may happen in real life. The purpose of this is to prepare the students for the real-life language use (Gu Yueguo, 1998, p.89). Also role-plays will be the most commonly used method to ensure that the students can use effectively what they have learned in real communication (Gu Yueguo, 1998, p.239).

Richards suggests that collaborative communication activities such as role plays have the following characteristics:

They provide opportunities to practice strategies for opening, developing, and terminating conversational encounters.

They require learners to develop meanings collaboratively.

They necessitate the use of turn-taking rules.

They practice use of conversational routines and expressions.

They involve learners in different kinds of roles, necessitating use of different styles of speaking.

They require negotiated completion of tasks.

They involve information sharing.

They focus on comprehensible and meaningful input and output.

They require a high degree of learner participation.

(Richards 1985b p.83)

5. Project Design

5.1 Target Group and Control Group

Two groups of students will be needed for comparison. The Target Group, contained with 20 students of Class One, who will use the role-play activities as the main classroom activities. They will be asked to spend 25 minutes to do the role-play activity at the production stage in each 45-minute lesson. And the Control Group, contained with 20 students of Class Two, who will be taught in the traditional ways and use the English tests method. They will be asked to do an oral English test in each week. The sample groups are consisted of two classes of freshmen in Beijing City University, and they have the same English level at the beginning of the project. They were taught by the same teacher, but in different ways.

5.2 Communicative teaching method to be used in the project

Drawing on the discovery of the problem analysis and rationale quoted above, a project is designed to arouse the students' motivation in speaking English by using role-play activities in their classroom learning.

5.3 Research tools

Three data collection instruments will be used in the research: observation notes, questionnaire, and interview notes.

6. Project Implementation

6.1 The procedure of the project implementation

Week I

Week I was the beginning of the project implementation. So in the first week, to the Target group, it was very important to make students enjoy doing the activity of role-play. So based on the textbook's Unit Three, the researcher used the role-play activities as the main classroom activities to the target group which was Class One. They were asked to spend 25 minutes to do the role-play activity at the production stage in the 45-minute lesson, and learned how to asking the information in the real-life conditions. Students got into groups of four, each one with a different role. The teacher hung a picture of a birthday part on the blackboard, also wrote a situation and some roles on the blackboard. From this activity students could practice the way of asking the information with the question words "Who, What, When, Where, Why, How...".

At the same time the researcher used an oral English test activity on the class to the Control group which was Class Two. The students were asked to do a little oral English test of using the question words "Who, What, When, Where, Why, How..." which they just learned from the textbook's Unit three at the production stage. And the researcher told the students the results of the test would be recorded.

Week II

Week II was a practicing week. So in the second week, to the Target group, it was very important to make students enjoy speaking English from the way of doing role-play activities. So based on the textbook's Unit Four, the researcher used the role-play activities as the main classroom activities to the target group which was Class One. They were asked to spend 25 minutes to do the role-play activity at the production stage in the 45-minute lesson, and learned how to asking for and giving directions in the real-life conditions. Students got into groups of four, each one with a different role. The teacher also wrote a situation of asking and giving directions on the blackboard. From this activity students could practice the way of asking and giving directions just like: "Where's...? How to get to...? ...over there. Turn left. Turn right."

At the same time the researcher used an oral English test activity on the class to the Control group which was Class Two. The students were asked to do a little oral English test of using the sentences "Where's...? How to get to...? ...over there. Turn left. Turn right..." which they just learned from the textbook's Unit Four at the production stage. And the researcher told the students the results of the test would be recorded.

Week III

Week III was an improving week. So in the third week, to the Target group, it should improve the role-play activity and

check if students could speak English autonomously. So based on the textbook's Unit Five, the researcher used the role-play activities as the main classroom activities to the target group which was Class One. They were asked to spend 25 minutes to do the role-play activity at the production stage in the 45-minute lesson, and learned how to asking for things in the real-life conditions. Students got into groups of four, each one with a different role. From this activity students could practice the way of asking for things just like: "...lend me..., I want..., How much..., Have you got...? Here you are."

At the same time the researcher used an oral English test activity on the class to the Control group which was Class Two. The students were asked to do a little oral English test of using the sentences "...lend me..., I want..., How much..., Have you got...? Here you are..." which they just learned from the textbook's Unit Five at the production stage. And the researcher told the students the results of the test would be recorded.

Week IV

Week IV does not have any teaching tasks. Instead it was for consolidation and data collection.

6.2 Data collection

As planned, the students of both groups were asked to do the questionnaire and the interview after the project.

6.2.1 Observation notes

The researcher took the observation notes on each class as well as after each lesson to help record the students' response and the researcher's own observation. At the end of the project, the researcher could see if there were any changes with the motivation of the two groups' students in speaking English on the class.

6.2.2 Questionnaire

After the project, the Control Group and the Target Group were asked to fill out the post-questionnaire, which investigated their attitudes and opinions about the role-play activity and the oral English test method, and showing the result of the project as well. The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements and mainly related with the aspects on which teaching method could arouse the students' motivation of speaking English. And let students choose one activity from the three classroom activities which the researcher had used in the oral English class. The questionnaire cost about 5 minutes and it was finished in the fourth week oral English class. Based on the midterm oral English exam results, the participants of each group were divided into three small groups which were one groups of excellent students, one groups of average students, and one group of low mark students. The students were assured that their names would be kept anonymous in order to express their true ideas and attitudes about language learning.

6.2.3 Interview

The interviews of this research were took place in the researcher's office after the project. The researcher took the interviews separately to the students of the Control and Target groups. The researcher chose 2 excellent students, 2 average students, and 2 low mark students from each group. Therefore, the total interviewees were 12 students. The researcher asked them the same questions about the three texts (Unit 3-Unit 5) which she had taught them in those three weeks. And the questions consisted of several key elements in them: more interesting and like to tell something about the text / interesting / just so-so / boring. For example, I asked one excellent student, "Which texts in our learned three texts do you think is interesting?" Then the researcher must ask this question to other 11 students. The interviews were taken place one by one, and each interview of one student would last about 5 minutes.

6.3 Major deviations

The researcher had planed to take the interview during the project. But because the project time was limited, the researcher began the interview after the project.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Research results

7.1.1 The results of the observation notes

The researcher compared the observation notes.

In the observation notes for the first week, the Target group's students were as the same as the Control group's students who were done the tasks almost under the pressure from the teacher. And no students in Target group did the role-play actively at first. But during the activity, more and more group members hung their hands up and wanted to do the activities.

In the observation for the second week, some group-students in the Target group were asked to do the role-play actively. But the Control group's students were also on under the pressure from the teacher, they could finish the oral English test activity.

At last, in the observation for the third week, most group-students in the Target group were asked to do the role-play actively, while the Control group's students were also as before.

So from the observation, the researcher found that during the three weeks of teaching, the students of Target group became more and more active in practicing role-play activities and they had more and more strong motivation of speaking English on the class, while the situation was obviously different in the Control group. The students of Control group were always passive in speaking English and were afraid of speaking English. They often worried they had some errors in the oral English tests. It seemed that they studied English tests and wanted to speak English well just for passing the oral English tests. It indicated that the experimental teaching method could be helpful for students on the aspect of arousing the motivation of speaking English.

7.1.2 The results of the questionnaire

The researcher divided each group's students into three types to do the questionnaire according to their midterm oral English exam marks. They were 4 excellent students, 4 average students, and 4 low mark students in each group. The questions in the questionnaire are mainly concerned about which teaching method the students thought could arouse their motivation of English reading. This quantitative data were calculated manually. The descriptive statistic analyses were applied to calculate the percentages concerned in the questionnaire. There were no missing data in the 24 sheets of questionnaire papers.

a. Control group:

The researcher conducted the three small groups' statistics separately from the Control group, and use the total number of A (traditional method) or B (oral English tests method) or C (other methods) in each group divided by the total number of questions to get the percentages. There are totally 28As, 28Bs and 28Cs for each small group. The results are 13As, 14Bs, and 1C in the excellent students' group; 11As, 11Bs, and 6Cs in the average students' group; 10As, 1B, and 17Cs in the low mark students' group. Then compared the results of these three groups and calculate a common result. Then the researcher got three different results. The result was as follow Table1.

Insert Table 1 Here

The table 1 illustrated the percentage of excellent students chose traditional method was 46%, oral English tests method was a little higher than the traditional which was 50%, and other methods was 4%; The percentage of average students chose traditional method was 40%, oral English tests method was as the same as the traditional method which was also 40%, and chose other methods was 20%; At last the percentage of low mark students chose traditional method was 36%, oral English tests method was only 4%, and other methods reached up to 60%. The results obtained from the quantitative analysis were listed in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 Here

From the Figure 1 we could obviously see that excellent students and average students thought the teaching method of traditional and oral English were just so-so, and they did think these two methods aroused their motivation of English speaking highly. And the low mark students even thought the oral English tests method was more terrible than traditional methods. And they thought there must be some other methods could arouse their motivation of speaking English.

b. Target group:

Then the researcher used the same way as above and calculated the percentage of each activity which different levels of students form the Target group chose in the questionnaire. There are 11As, 16Bs, and 1C in the excellent students' group; 5As, 20Bs, and 3Cs in the average students' group; 3As, 24Bs, and 1C in the low mark students' group. Also the researcher got three different results just as Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

The Table 2 illustrated the percentage of excellent students chose traditional method was 39%, role-play method was more than the traditional which was 57%, and other methods was 4%; The percentage of average students chose traditional method was 18%, role-play method was much higher than the traditional method which was 71%, and chose other methods was 11%; At last the percentage of low mark students chose traditional method was only 11%, but role-play method reached up to 85%, and other methods was 4%. The results obtained from the quantitative analysis were listed in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 Here

From the Figure 2 we could obviously see that excellent students didn't have great changes on using what methods could arouse their motivation of speaking English, but there were great changes to the average and low mark students. They thought there were great gaps between traditional method and role-play method on the aspect of arousing their motivation of English speaking. Most of them thought these two methods aroused their motivation of English speaking

highly.

c. the comparison of the two group's questionnaires:

From the above tables and figures, we could easily see the percentages of oral English tests method were almost the same and even lower than the traditional method to the students in Control group. But we could also see the percentages of role-play method were much higher than the traditional method. So we could conclude that using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using traditional methods and oral English tests.

In addition, the percentage of low mark students chose role-play activity were much higher than the excellent students, so we could say role-play activity was more effective to the low mark students than to the excellent students on the aspect of arousing students' motivation in English speaking.

7.1.3 The results of the interviews

At last the researcher calculated the students' answers in the interviews. Then compared the results of the Control group with that of the Target group and got the result as follow Figure 3:

Insert Figure 3 Here

From the scheme 3, we could easily see that the wave of Control group was smoothly while the wave of Target group was obviously up. So we could conclude that the two group students had different expressions on the three same texts. The students of Control group which was asked using oral English tests activities always thought the texts were just so-so, and didn't have more motivation of learning the texts. But the students of Target group which was asked using role-play activities thought the texts were more and more interesting. So from the above results, we could conclude that using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using oral English tests method.

7.2 Discussion

The comparison of the Control Group's results and the Target Group's results was obviously proved that, compared with the traditional teaching methods, there were not any obvious changes of using oral English tests method, but there were great changes of using role-play activity method on the aspect of arousing the students' motivation of English speaking.

Shi Lan's (2004) study suggested motivation, language, and reading-related activities should "spread" throughout the whole process of English teaching. And an interesting task could often compensate for an uninteresting text. That was just the same as the results of my interviews. And at the same time I found that using role-play activity could arouse the low mark students' motivation of speaking English more effectively than to the excellent students from the results of questionnaire, and more obvious to boys than girls.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Research findings

The present study is chiefly based on the project that the researcher conducted within four weeks' time. It aimed to arouse the students' motivation of English speaking. In the study, two kind of English teaching activities for oral English class were designed according to the result of problem analysis. The project was implemented and proved that the students in the Target Group became more interested in speaking English than the students in the Control Group.

The comparison of the Control Group's results and the Target Group's results was obviously proved that, compared with the traditional teaching methods, there were not any obvious changes of using oral English tests method, but there were great changes of using role-play activity method on the aspect of arousing the students' motivation of English speaking. So with the results of questionnaire and interviews the researcher got the same conclusion with what she had observed during the oral English classes. That was using the activity of role-play is more effective in arousing the college students' motivation in speaking English than using oral English tests.

Because helping to change the learner's knowledge—manifested in changes in academic, motor, social, and personal behavior—is what education is all about (Mayer, 2003, p.15), it is very important in our English teaching to help students obtain the language skills in English. Also because with interest-based learning students can make qualitatively better learning (Mayer, 1998, p.56), we should raise the students interests of English reading in our English teaching. This study proved that except the individual interests of learning, situational interests was also very important.

8.2 Limitations

Firstly, the sample size (20 students to each group) was small, so the results might not be typical.

Secondly, the participants were freshmen in Beijing City University who were adjusting to the new learning habits, so the results of the research might not be very stable.

Thirdly, because of the interesting elements of each text the researcher taught in the class were different to each students,

it might affect the results of the research.

Fourthly, the time of the research was too short, so maybe there were some unstable data.

8.3 Overall significance

Motivation colors and shapes students' involvement in learning and it stimulates feelings that students associate with these experiences (Winne, 1985). Before learning people set out to do with a will to learn which is called goal-directed behavior. Whenever students have a goal, there is something to achieve (Waxman & Walberg 1991). It is clear that the motivation can affect one's learning efficiency deeply. Using what kind of methodology in our English teaching can arouse our students' motivation of learning is very important. So from the result of this research, we know that in our Chinese university, the teachers can use some communicative classroom activities such as role-play to arouse the students' motivation of English speaking. Thereby, we can help our students learn English well.

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Table 1.

students' type	methods		
	Traditional methods	Oral English tests method	Other methods
Excellent students	46%	50%	4%
Average students	40%	40%	20%
Low mark students	36%	4%	60%

Table 2.

students' type	methods		
	Traditional methods	Role-play activity method	Other methods
Excellent students	39%	57%	4%
Average students	18%	71%	11%
Low mark students	11%	85%	4%

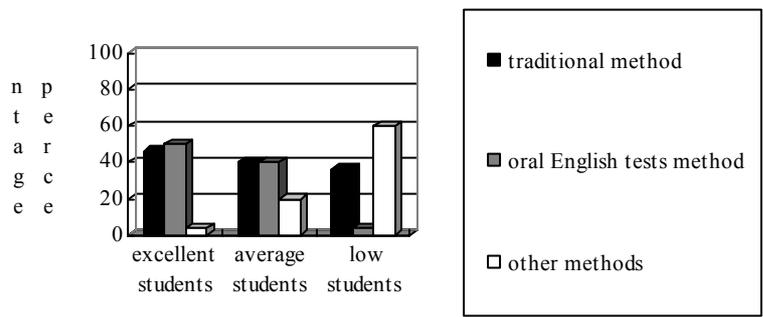


Figure 1. the result of the Control group's questionnaire

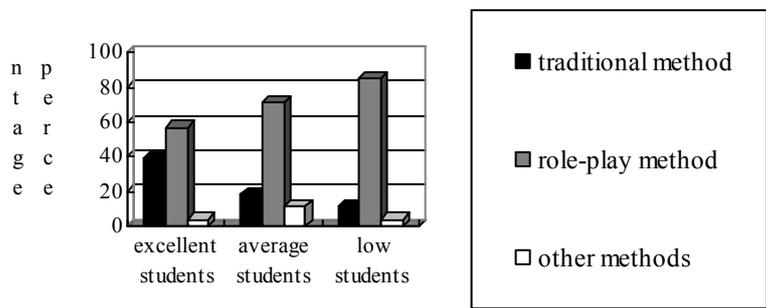


Figure 2. the result of the Target group's questionnaire

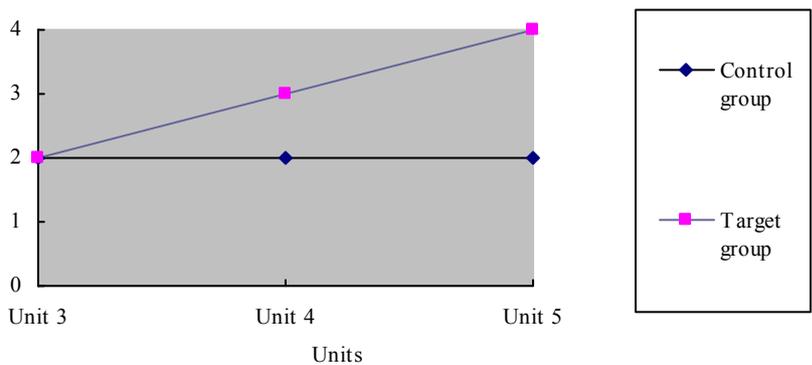


Figure 3. The comparison of Control and Target group's interviews

(Additional explanations of the scheme 3: 1 = boring, 2 = just so-so, 3 = interesting, 4 = more interesting and like to tell something about the text. The points of each line meant the three units that students had learned for those three weeks in the class.)