

A Study of Chinese English Learners' Speaking Problems: Current Situation, Causes and Countermeasures

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically investigates three obstacles to the development of Chinese students' oral English proficiency: pronunciation bias due to language transfer, syntactic confusion due to Chinese thinking, and speaking anxiety due to cross-cultural differences. Through the construction of a four-dimensional reform system, namely, "Teacher Training - Technology Enhancement - Curriculum Innovation - Evaluation Reform", this study proposes a mechanism for linking urban and rural teachers and an artificial intelligence virtual scenario training and a graded certification system. By constructing a four-dimensional reform system of 'teacher training, technological empowerment, curriculum innovation and assessment reform', we propose a joint mechanism for urban and rural teachers, artificial intelligence virtual scenario training, and a grading certification system, which provide theoretical and practical methods to solve the dilemma of 'high scores but low ability'.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Students; Oral English Proficiency; Teaching Policy; Test-Based Education

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

As a global general language, the ability to use English has become a significant factor in core competence in the 21st century. 'A high level of English proficiency is a type of community capital.' ^[1] The World Economic Forum's Future Employment Report 2025 states that active listening and multilingualism are listed as one of the core skills, with 50 per cent of employers considering them as essential qualities for talent. In the context of transnational collaboration, speaking proficiency directly affects intercultural communication skills. ^[2] However, Chinese students' speaking performance lags their reading and writing skills. According to the IELTS Global Report (2023-2024), the average speaking score of mainland Chinese test takers is 5.5, ranking 38th out of 39 major regions, which is lower than the average score of reading and writing, ^[3] which contradicts the goal of the Ministry of Education's 'One Belt, One Road' Education Initiative, which proposes to 'cultivate 500,000 multicultural talents with intercultural communicative competence in ten years'.

These problems stem from China's teaching method, which emphasises reading and writing but not listening and speaking, leading learners to fall into the predicament of 'high scores but low competence'. This paper focuses on teaching methods and policies, systematically analyses the existing problems of spoken English education in China and explores the path of reform in line with national conditions.

1.2 Research Implications

This paper has both theoretical and practical significance. At the theoretical level, by analysing the phenomena of intonation transfer, Chinglish and mute English, it strengthens the understanding of the second language acquisition characteristics of Chinese native speakers and provides Chinese examples for second language teaching. At the same time, the discussion of issues related to the education system, cultural concepts and teachers' competence is of revelation value to the study of English-speaking cognition in China.

On the practical level, the study points out the problem of 'high scores and low competence' in English education in China and provides possible solutions to the problems of urban-rural teacher imbalance and the assessment system. Multidimensional reform methods are also proposed. These studies are of practical significance for the innovation of English curriculum design and the enhancement of national foreign language competence.

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of this article is to comprehensively analyse the obstacles to the development of Chinese students' oral English proficiency. By critically analysing the limitations of existing countermeasures, it proposes a four-dimensional approach to reform that is consistent with China's educational environment, and provides policy makers, educational

institutions and teachers with practical guidelines that can be drawn upon.

1.4 Research Methodology and Framework

This paper will adopt the literature research method.

2 Literature Review: The Core Performance of Chinese Students' Speaking Problems

The core manifestations of Chinese students' oral English problems can be attributed to three aspects: language transfer, cultural psychology and language structure.

In terms of language transfer, since the phonological patterns and structures of the mother tongue have an impact on the second language and Chinese and English belong to different language families, for Chinese learners of English, the Chinese language is the primary influence in the learning of English pronunciation, and the learners will look for similar pronunciation in Chinese to replace the English pronunciation.^[4] Furthermore, dialects also interfere with spoken English. This kind of negative transfer of intonation may affect the pronunciation and comprehension of spoken language. For instance, students from the western regions of China have difficulty distinguishing the pronunciation of /æ/ and /e/ in the words "bad" and "bed".

At the level of language structure, Chinese English also forms a barrier. It manifests itself in Chinese syntactic structures with English vocabulary and in pronunciation that contains elements of Chinese phonology.^[5] For example, in the sentence "You bring us happy. Where have you where have happy.", the adjective is wrongly used as a noun. Although it does not affect the understanding, it reveals an inexperienced oral expression.

The cultural-psychological dimension presents a double problem. The first is the phenomenon of classroom silence. In the 1980s, Some scholars have proposed that silence is inseparable from the process of second language learning.^[6] The act of silence in the classroom is thought to hinder learning. Some scholars took Chinese undergraduate students who were not English majors as their research subjects and found through surveys and observations that more than two-thirds of them preserved their silence in the English-speaking classroom due to lack of self-confidence, anxiety, and cultural perceptions.^[7] The second is the lack of cross-cultural confidence. The study about 198 Australian international students shows that the unfamiliarity of the target language and cultural background affects Chinese students' oral expression, and students can only adapt to the learning environment through communication so as to enhance cross-cultural adaptability, and linguistic self-confidence is the key to socio-cultural adaptation.^[8]

3 Integration of Literature: Multidimensional Causes of Oral Language Problems

First, the influence of the educational orientation. At present, China's English proficiency tests include the National College Entrance Examination English Test, the Graduate Entrance English Test, the University English Test. There is no mandatory requirement for speaking ability in any of these tests, and in many regions of China, spoken English is not taken as an examination. Therefore, in English teaching, teachers focus more on grammar and basic knowledge, while neglecting the training of students' oral skills. Moreover, most students do not attach sufficient importance to English oral communication and fail to recognize its significance.

Secondly, the influence of language environment. Chinese students learn English in a Chinese-speaking environment, which usually lacks the necessary language environment except in a limited number of classrooms. If teachers fail to intentionally create environments that allow students to practice English in the classroom, students will have even fewer opportunities to practice English after class. Although students can practice speaking English by attending speaking events and interacting with foreign teachers. However, these opportunities are very limited and vary greatly from region to region.

Third, the effect of speaking anxiety. "Foreign language anxiety is regarded as a kind of anxiety that occurs in specific contexts where one needs to express thoughts or communicate with others in a foreign language."^[9] Some studies have shown that students' lack of confidence in expressing themselves orally in English, which in turn leads to fear and anxiety, affects their normal communication and thinking. [10] This also leads to a vicious circle between the three problems of 'lack of confidence, silence in the English classroom, and poor English-speaking ability'.

Fourth, the influence of teachers. Teachers, as the main body of the teaching process, influence learners to a certain extent by their speaking level and teaching methods. A study conducted interviews and questionnaires with 706 university teachers of English language learning from 22 cities in China. 208 out of 331 respondents said that the trouble came from their own limited language ability, which made it difficult to motivate their students to learn, and that they had insufficient knowledge base to carry out effective speaking activities.^[11]

Meanwhile, teachers do not pay enough attention to spoken English. Most teachers tend to teach only the content of the Oxford English for Junior Secondary Schools textbook and ignore the knowledge of phonetics. In addition, there are some teachers who have limited knowledge of phonetics and pronunciation pedagogy. In the study of oral teaching of secondary school English teachers, it was found that teachers neglect the teaching of phonetic symbols skills, resulting in many students failing to acquire the skills of spelling words correctly, which not only affects students' reading ability, but also leads to poor oral expression.^[12]

Fifth, the influence of teaching facilities. Some scholars conducted a comparative study between oral teaching in rural secondary schools and urban secondary schools, and the study found that urban secondary schools have better infrastructure, and students can receive more information when learning English, but rural students do not have the equipment to learn standard English.^[13] In addition to the lack of teachers, insufficient budgets can cause schools to reduce the amount of money invested in teaching and learning facilities, such as multimedia and voice practice rooms, which can affect language teaching and learning.

4 Literature Critique: Effectiveness and Limitations of Existing Countermeasures

To address the long-standing issue among Chinese students of "emphasising reading and writing while neglecting listening and speaking", the government and teachers have implemented a series of measures.

In terms of policy practice, the reform of spoken English in China also faces challenges. In response to the call for English teaching reform, the Ministry of Education reformed the syllabus as early as the beginning of the 21st century. For example, the revised English syllabus for nine-year compulsory and senior secondary education in Shanghai at that time suggested teachers to adopt an integrated approach, combining oral and written assignments, organizing group and team activities, and creating chances for students to communicate and interact in English.^[14] In 1999, the speaking test in the University English Test was incorporated into the national testing system. Changes in the test syllabus have also helped to improve speaking skills to some extent. In 2018, the Ministry of Education (MOE) released the Chinese English Proficiency Level Standard, but this standard has shortcomings in terms of acceptance and implementation time.

In terms of teaching strategies, the Ministry of Education released the Guidelines for Teaching English at University in 2015, which required Chinese universities to adopt task-based teaching methods in teaching English at university. Some scholars conducted a questionnaire survey of university teachers and found that while teachers maintained a positive attitude towards task-based pedagogy, they were constrained by resources and administrative systems.^[15] One study found that there is a conflict between task-based language teaching methodology and the notion of the importance and preference of language teaching in China, where education is teacher-centred and the teacher-student relationship is hierarchical in nature in traditional Chinese culture. Chinese education emphasises the transmission of knowledge and language teaching focuses more on the language translation method than on criticism and debate.^[16]

Some researchers have studied the main barriers to task-based teaching in primary and secondary education contexts. Curriculum materials, teachers' perceptions of the importance of speaking, class size, and students' levels and abilities all affect the application of task-based language teaching in the classroom.^[17]

In some schools in rural areas, teachers use a combination of grammar-translation method and listening and speaking pedagogy. In classrooms with this mixed teaching method, teachers focus mainly on the normative accuracy of language expression and improve fluency through repetition and imitation. However, this teaching method usually carries out meaningless language use, resulting in students' inability to apply the skills developed by the exercises to actual communication.

In addition to the task-based teaching method and the language translation method, the communicative language teaching method is also the main teaching method for spoken English in China. The Chinese Ministry of Education released a syllabus in 1999 that highlights the importance of communicative competence for university English learners. The communicative language teaching method was first introduced into China in the late 1970s, and in the early 21st century, it was widely promoted in some urban areas along the coast. However, the implementation of communicative language teaching method in China is full of difficulties and challenges. Some scholars examined teachers at the primary school level in rural China, and the results showed that the teachers were familiar with the basic principles of the pedagogical staff method, and they were willing to use the communicative language teaching method in the classroom; however, they lacked authentic teaching materials and had fewer classroom hours to devote to communicative teaching. A researcher studied 60 second language teachers and found that they focused more on reading and writing skills.^[18]

In addition, other scholars have pointed out that there are differences between the theories of communicative language teaching and Chinese culture; communicative language teaching emphasises interactivity and is learner-centred, whereas the Chinese education system is based on a teacher-led approach.

All of these are closely related to China's exam-oriented education system. Teachers are under pressure from exams to complete the teaching syllabus. To enable students to achieve good exam scores, most teachers do not teach the content

of oral communication in the textbooks.

A researcher has built an audio-visual corpus of English teachers' real lectures, and by analysing it, it was found that teachers enhance effective interaction between teachers and students by giving positive feedback to students, creating a positive interactive atmosphere in English and giving students more confidence and motivation to express their ideas.^[19]

5 Discussion

Overall, there are many dilemmas faced by Chinese students in the acquisition of spoken English. At the level of language expression, the difference in phonological systems between Chinese and English leads to the prevalence of pronunciation transfer, and dialect interference further exacerbates intonation errors. The Chinese thinking of syntactic structure reflects the fault line in the transformation of linguistic knowledge into communicative competence.

The reason for these problems is that the test-oriented education system has long neglected the assessment of speaking ability, leading to the tilting of teaching resources towards grammatical knowledge, and the lack of authentic language environments and interaction opportunities for students, which in turn creates a vicious circle of anxiety and classroom silence. In addition, teachers' professional limitations are also a constraint, especially in rural areas, where the lack of teacher qualifications and teaching facilities exacerbate the problem of spoken English. Although the current reform measures have introduced the concepts of task-based teaching and communicative teaching methodology, they are faced with a variety of realities, such as traditional cultural concepts, class size, and assessment mechanisms. Due to the interaction of various factors, China's English oral education has fallen into the predicament of "high investment but low output".

6 Suggestions for Countermeasures

By integrating the previous research findings of experts with the current actual situation of teaching in China, the author believes that one possible way to address the oral language problems of Chinese English learners is to implement a comprehensive reform measure.

The first step is to enhance the training for teachers and improve their English proficiency in teaching. This can be achieved by organising teachers to attend internationally recognised spoken English training courses such as CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching) and TEFL (Diploma in English Language Teaching) on a regular basis. Encourage teachers to participate in international training programs or to join online international teaching communities, such as the TESOL International Association Global Community. Through the establishment of long-term support mechanisms for rural teachers' English-speaking ability, For example, one-on-one teaching by teachers from top-notch schools in the city. Joint improvement of the teaching ability of urban and rural teachers can be realised. In addition, the government should invest more educational funds in rural areas to improve teaching conditions.^[20]

Secondly, optimise curriculum design and innovate teaching methods. Expression in English is a kind of active behaviour, and to achieve this process, students need to have a strong interest. Therefore, teachers should select materials that are familiar and interesting to the students. Improve teaching methods and carry out colorful teaching activities to achieve the teaching goal of improving language skills. For example, games are played in the classroom, and the game mechanism is used to stimulate students' interest in learning, which helps to improve the clarity of oral expression. Watching films can create the good English learning environment needed by students, who can improve their speaking skills, expand their vocabulary, and improve their pronunciation and intonation from real language.^[21]

The third aspect requires strengthening the technical support of artificial intelligence. Designers can create cross-cultural communication tools based on virtual reality for students, helping learners establish an environment for practicing English oral communication, thereby promoting personalized learning. Furthermore, teachers and parents should encourage students to use the existing language learning applications. For instance, the software Elsa Speak can recognize speech tone and provide personalized feedback. Software such as Hello Talk and Tandem offer learners the opportunity to connect with native English speakers. By chatting with peers in the chat rooms, students can practice their oral English in a respectful and harmonious environment, which can reduce anxiety and enhance self-confidence.^[22]

Fourth, establish a complete assessment system for spoken English. Increase the proportion of communication projects and group discussions in the English class, thereby enhancing formative assessment. One can also refer to the oral assessment models of IELTS and TOEFL, learn and refer to the international summative oral assessment methods. Besides, regarding the reform of assessment and examination systems, one can refer to the certification method of the Japanese STEP examination and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and establish a separate oral proficiency level certification system. At the same time, the government and education departments should make policy adjustments to increase the proportion of oral scores in high-risk examinations.

7 Conclusion

The problems faced by Chinese students in their spoken English are characterized by language transfer, Chinese-style thinking, and communication anxiety, all which stem from the long-term neglect of oral assessment in the exam-oriented education system, resulting in the lack of teaching resources. To solve the current problems, a "four-pronged reform approach" needs to be established. At the policy level, an English oral assessment certification system should be established. In the technical dimension, personalized training models can be constructed using artificial intelligence and virtual reality scenarios. In the teaching dimension, English oral environments can be created through games and movies to stimulate students' interest in learning. At the same time, the English oral teaching skills of teachers in urban and rural areas should be improved. The combined effect of these four methods provides a possible solution to the problem of "emphasizing input and output" in current Chinese oral English education. These methods cultivate cross-cultural communication skills in real environments and offer Chinese solutions for the reform of English oral education in non-native English-speaking countries around the world.

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