

Exploring Spoken English Instruction in the Post-Pandemic Landscape: Assessing Social Media's Role, Challenges, and Prospects in China

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Abstract. In the post-pandemic era, education in China has undergone a momentous transformation, with a notable shift towards utilizing social media platforms as educational tools. Educators in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) have been seeking ways to take full advantage of them to enhance students' learning and apply new information in China. As English speaking skills become increasingly vital in academic and professional settings, educators are exploring innovative approaches to language learning and experimenting with integrating social media into spoken English teaching. This paper aims to examine the current status, challenges, and opportunities associated with this pedagogical shift, by synthesizing existing research findings, and to present an overview of spoken English teaching through social media in China in the post-epidemic era. The current landscape showcases a rapid increase in the use of platforms such as WeChat, Zhihu, Bilibili, Weibo and Douyin live streams for facilitating speaking practice. However, challenges persist, including ensuring the quality of instruction, bridging the digital divide, and navigating cultural nuances in communication. Nonetheless, where there are challenges, there are opportunities. This transition presents numerous opportunities, such as innovative teaching methodologies, access to authentic language input, global connectivity, and personalized learning experiences. Effective integration of pedagogy and technology is crucial in harnessing the potential of social media for enhancing English speaking skills in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: spoken English teaching, social media, post-pandemic era, China, social media's role, challenges, prospects.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, English plays a significant role in international communication and learning [1]. As speaking is one of the abilities required for communication, speaking is regarded as the most crucial ability that must be thoroughly acquired when learning a new language among four essential language skills [2]. Speaking skills are tools for social cohesion, social hierarchy, career advancement, and business development. The importance of communication in job search also makes oral skills one of the most important skills [3]. Similarly, Le [4] views speaking as an interactive procedure of creating meaning which includes generating, accepting, and processing knowledge.

However, English speaking has always been regarded as the most challenging skill out of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) that learners should master in language learning. Although after more than ten years of English learning, the phenomenon of "deaf-mute English" is still very common among Chinese English learners. In a study conducted by Al-Sobhi and Preece [5], five factors that hinder students from speaking were identified: (1) lack of exposure to language, (2) lack of motivation, (3) students' anxiety and lack of confidence, (4) limited knowledge of English, and (5) inefficient teaching methodology.

Based on Ariyanti's [6] research, motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem are three traits that hamper EFL students in English-speaking classes. Furthermore, Ilyas' [7] team found a prominent psychological problem in speaking skills which is low self-esteem. For the majority of the learners, speaking is thought of as one of the most anxiety-provoking activities as it involves interactions and communication, especially when they lack ideas and are unable to participate in speaking activities. Therefore, as educators, English language teachers should create interactive environments for their

students to practice speaking. Moreover, the fear of making mistakes is inevitable in learning all languages, teachers must be innovative and flexibly use various techniques to help learners acquire speaking skills to be able to express their ideas clearly and communicate well in English.

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes in the field of English language teaching, with a shift from traditional offline models to online modes during this period. However, in the post-pandemic era, there are still many problems in the effective implementation of the process of English teaching, leading to the inability to achieve better results in the quality and efficiency of English teaching and effective cultivation of students' practical application ability. In recent years, English speaking has attracted the attention of experts and scholars [8]. Fortunately, unlike during COVID-19, students can take classes in the post-epidemic era, which provides them with new opportunities to speak. The emergence of social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (TikTok) has provided technical support for creating new intelligent teaching environments, promoting reform and breakthroughs in English teaching methods yet it also brings forth its own set of challenges, such as. This literature review seeks to examine these challenges and propose strategies for overcoming them.

2. The Role of Social Media in Teaching Spoken English in China

Digital devices will be used in all aspects of our lives in 2024, from communication, entertainment, travel, international business, healthcare, and education. One of the most versatile digital technologies used by most people in the world is social media. In China, the use of social media has become a way of life for college students. With China's unique technological landscape and a burgeoning population of English learners, understanding the dynamics of utilizing China-based social media to enhance speaking skills is crucial [9]. Meanwhile, many studies have shown that using social media in language activities can provide learners with interactive environments that help learners improve their speaking skills by relieving anxiety and enhancing their intrinsic motivation to learn. As a result, many institutions and teachers are conducting research into integrating social media into the spoken language classroom.

With the rapid development of Chinese social media, there are various Chinese social media applications in spoken English teaching. Educators can choose whatever they want in line with their requirements. For instance, communication platforms such as WeChat, video sharing platforms like Bilibili, short video clip platforms such as Douyin (TikTok), Chinese university learning platform MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and mobile online learning apps such as 51talk and Keke English have been integrated into English language learning to improve speaking skills.

Currently, MOOCs and WeChat are the two main social media platforms for both learners and lecturers. To begin with Mooc, it is the most commonly adopted technology platform in universities and colleges in China. The goals of creating English-taught MOOCs in China include improving the academic English proficiency of Chinese learners. Due to China's foreign language education reform, hundreds of EFL MOOCs are accessible to learners, offered through two prominent MOOC platforms in China, namely iCourse (China University MOOC platform) and xuetangX. In addition, a growing number of English teachers are eager to develop their MOOCs, indicating an anticipated increase in their availability [10]. Teachers record spoken English courses and then posted on MOOCs, and learners can freely choose what they want to practice and improve their speaking skills without feeling anxious in a physical classroom. However, the disadvantage lies in the lack of interaction between learners and lecturers. On top of that, if learners are not self-conscious, it is difficult to achieve ideal learning results. While WeChat is different from MOOCs, as mentioned in Lang's study, its real-time communication, interactivity and fragmented time utilization have attracted the attention of educators for its application in teaching. Moreover, according to Namaziandost, et al.'s [11] research, WeChat applications can eliminate the time and space constraints of English learning and allow students to review inside and outside the classroom. English educators can use WeChat as an auxiliary tool to assign oral practice tasks to students outside class, which can solve the problem of insufficient

practice time in regular English classes in schools. The group instructor should also remember to give timely feedback to mobilize the enthusiasm of the group speakers and urge their progress. It also can reinforce teacher-student interactions and provide timely feedback to students, such as question-asking and answering through instant messaging and recording practice through voice messaging. For example, in a spoken English class, even though teachers encourage them to be relaxed, some students still are too shy or afraid to open their mouths in front of the class. However, it is universal that speaking is significant for every learner because no one can learn a language well without speaking and practicing. Therefore, English teachers can require students to record their voices and share in classroom groups, and teachers give students real-time feedback, such as pronunciation, and grammar accuracy. Zhai and Gao [12] reported that corrective feedback makes a significant contribution to teaching practice, especially in promoting the development of spoken English. Meanwhile, students can ask teachers questions as well. Once students build their confidence, they can gradually speak English in public.

3. Prospects in Spoken English Teaching via Social Media

Social media have gained much respect and popularity among EFL teachers who need to go beyond the traditional methods of teaching where teachers are used to accomplish most parts of the job [13]. Indeed, the use of Social media as a tool to improve students' listening and speaking/communicative skills would find an enthusiastic welcome from the learners' part as it goes hand in hand with their interests [14]. In the post-pandemic era, teaching spoken English via social media brings three opportunities to educators: basically, they have a wider range of teaching resources, transferring to a learner-centered, available and flexible teaching environment.

In contrast to traditional teaching methods, teaching spoken English via social media platforms opens an avenue to a wider range of resources and authentic material. Educators can collect all sorts of teaching materials such as video clips, photos, songs, and mini-programs to enrich teaching, arouse students' interests, and activate the classroom atmosphere. Additionally, social media platforms provide opportunities for learner-centered and personalized learning. Educators will pay more attention to what interests learners rather than just focus on the content provided by textbooks and help learners apply what they have learned in different language contexts. Furthermore, adopting a more flexible and accessible learning environment also allows educators and learners to interact in more flexible ways than traditional learning environments. In the past, students were required to sit in the classroom and listen to their teachers. Usually, teachers ask students questions and students passively answer questions. Now, teachers can form a group to assist students in practicing spoken English. For one thing, speaking English via Wechat WeChat voice recording with will eliminate students' anxiety; for another, students will possibly get more chances to practice, especially when they do not have adequate time to speak during class. Moreover, flexible mobile applications can also strongly support English learners in increasing their motivation for language learning. For instance, Tayan's [15] findings showed that 85% of university students and 100% of teachers thought that mobile learning could act as a motivational stimulus for learning a foreign language. Apart from that, Namaziandost's [11] research demonstrated that when students post homework in the form of pictures, audio, and text through WeChat, teachers can provide targeted feedback on the performance of the homework in different forms to promote the overall development of language learning.

In a word, because of fast interactions, flexible environments, and feedback that promote personalized instruction ultimately lead to cognitive understanding and speaking output. Therefore, the method of teaching spoken English through social media platforms is easily accepted by teachers and students.

4. Challenges in Spoken English Teaching via Social Media

Despite the above-mentioned opportunities in the application of social media in modern digital English language learning and spoken English language teaching in China in the post-pandemic era, some challenges that require English language scholars as well as English language educators to pay attention still exist. Teachers must comprehend the issues faced by English Language Learners (ELLs) and use various teaching strategies to improve students' English-speaking abilities [16].

In 2017, Gafni [17] conducted a study on learning foreign languages using mobile applications and pointed out that there are also some disadvantages to using mobile apps for learning, such as the technical aspects of mobile devices (i.e. small screens and keyboards) or the fact that the internet does not have to be available everywhere. Students may be distracted by incoming calls or messages. Sometimes, informal learning outside the classroom can be affected by outdoor noise. For instance, according to Xiu's [18] research, in rural areas like Xizang, Northwest China, a large number of interesting short films in different aspects may distract young students from learning English for academic purposes. Young EFL learners may be attracted to other videos because they are too young to self-regulate academic learning effectively.

Additionally, Kilimova's [19] study showed that mobile technology can be leveraged to support language learning; however, teachers need to serve as role models, teach how to integrate mobile applications into learning routines and promote student development by increasing students' motivation to use mobile devices as learning tools both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, educators must meet the students' language and social needs to achieve this goal. Besides, as his findings indicated, students reported that the app's support for communication performance was not very good; they did not find teacher notifications encouraging and did not make much use of pronunciation support, which was caused by several factors such as providing students with no context of words and phrases, or not testing all items on the final credit test.

On top of that, the challenge of developing sound pedagogical and instructional designs is faced by the majority of English educators. In 2022, Yu's [20] team reported that due to the influence of traditional English learning methods, it is difficult for English learners and teachers to adapt to the new mobile learning environment. Consequently, educators need to improve their skills and integrate the "technological content knowledge" with the "pedagogical knowledge". in organizing traditional classrooms while arranging and authoring the virtual component of tutoring on different platforms.

Though social media platforms are widely used inside and outside classrooms, there has been very little research investigating the use of short social media videos for English language learning by EFL young learners [21]. Therefore, in the post-pandemic area, the effectiveness of using social media in oral English teaching requires further research in the background of China.

5. Future Directions

Social media platforms allow educators and learners to interact with each other by speaking in real-time is more suitable for Chinese students. It eliminates or reduces students' shyness, loneliness, anxiety, etc., and establishes a positive relationship between educators and learners, thus improving students' intrinsic learning motivation. Educators should be open-minded to embrace the application of social media platforms make full use of its advantages and reduce the negative effects as well. As education institutions are embracing social media there is a need to optimize the positive effect of such technologies to bring them into pedagogy to make instruction and learning active and applicable to the cyber environment of the new millennium [22]. In the future, teaching spoken English via social media will become more and more popular in China. Policymakers should give a place for teaching via social media in education.

6. Conclusion

The rapid popularity of social media among contemporary university students and the integration of language learning has led researchers to bet the spotlight on the important and difficult-to-acquire area of speaking skill learning. The impact or benefits of social media applications have helped students to reduce their speaking anxiety, gain confidence in speaking and, at the same time, become more motivated to use the language [3]. This paper gives a brief overview of teaching spoken English via Chinese social media platforms in the post-pandemic era, revealing the role of social media in teaching spoken English in China, challenges, and opportunities provided by teaching integrated with social media platforms. Although social media has negative effects on teenagers, such as addiction or spending too much time using social media apps. Nonetheless, the need to connect with learners and engage them in a conducive learning environment far outweighs the negative impact of social media integration on speaking instruction. Since there is limited research on teaching spoken English via social media platforms in China, educators and scholars still need to explore more in this area.

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