

Influencing Factors and Countermeasures of Chinese Students' Oral English Proficiency

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Abstract. With China going global, oral English proficiency seems to be required in more scenarios such as chasing further education in English-medium countries and posts in transnational corporations. However, China's existing English education probably fails to satisfy the rising need for proficient oral English, where written English tends to be paid much more attention rather than oral English. Despite oral English has been increasingly concerned by the continuous curriculum reform in China, the actual level of Chinese students' oral English tends to be relatively low. Meanwhile, Chinese students are facing a range of challenges or difficulties in oral English learning. This paper is intended to search for certain approaches to lead Chinese students to overcome these challenges and attain a higher level of oral English proficiency. For this purpose, this paper will systematically review the prior studies. By analysing the results and findings of these researches, the common challenges faced by Chinese students in English learning have been summarised, which are dumb English, the insufficient level of professional quality of English teachers and the neglect of oral English. Moreover, the potential influencing factors aggravating the challenges have also been extracted, that is, foreign language anxiety, educational resources and the education system. Based on the challenges and influential factors, several recommendations have been provided, namely, teaching strategies applied in English classrooms, supporting more education funds and boosting the curriculum reform.

Keywords: Oral English proficiency, Foreign Language Anxiety, Dumb English.

1. Introduction

Globalisation has brought a mass of international communication and interaction in diverse fields, such as trades, culture, technologies and education, in which English appears to be a key language for numerous countries to effectively communicate and interact with each other in various contexts. As a consequence, more citizens with a high level of English competence are required in the majority of countries, especially in China, an important part of globalisation.

In China, the demand for English has become significantly increased. For example, certain posts with a higher level of salary tend to require those who master proficient English [1]. Additionally, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to pursue further education in English-medium countries [2]. Even for those who study at China's universities, English might be important for their academic goals, since plenty of academic research is conducted in English.

On account of the significance of English, China's education system attaches importance to English. However, English education in China perhaps pays more attention to written English but neglects the oral part. Thus, the oral English proficiency of Chinese students does not attain the level where they should be [3]. Even the students who can perform well in English examinations, maybe still fail to use English in actual communications and interactions. This issue can be obviously reflected in those Chinese students who are educated in China before going overseas to study at universities. Quantities of Chinese international students in English-medium contexts have a range of difficulties engaging in English learning environments, in which the students struggle to comprehend the content of the curricula, and cannot efficiently participate in in-class activities [4].

It could be seen that the oral English proficiency of Chinese students might not satisfy the actual requirements of Chinese society. In fact, to improve students' oral English proficiency, China's governments have made a certain extent of attempts through curriculum reform. In the continuous curriculum reforms, cultivating proficient English speakers for increasing international interactions

has been emphasised as a necessary education purpose, and the corresponding education instructions have also been proposed [1]. However, there might be difficulties in effectively promoting oral English education in China's education system so the attempts of China's government probably have limited effects in practice. Meanwhile, Chinese students are still facing certain challenges in oral English learning, and the overall level of oral English of Chinese students has not been apparently improved through the existing reforms.

This paper will attempt to explore how to improve Chinese students' oral English proficiency. What is remarkable here is that oral English proficiency in this paper tends to be defined as a dynamic ability to interact in real English environments that includes the capacities of vocabulary, English speaking, English listening and English communication. In other words, cultivating oral English proficiency in this paper seem to lead students to use English properly in actual the English-medium context.

The paper will adopt the literature analysis method to review the previous studies, including both empirical research and reviewing papers. The results and findings of the prior studies will be discussed and analysed, combining the understanding of the author of this paper. Through such analysis, the paper is intended to seek the approaches to raising the level of Chinese students' oral English competence, according to the following three dimensions. First of all, the paper will introduce three common challenges faced by Chinese students in English learning. Moreover, the factors that may negatively affect the presented challenges will be analysed. Furthermore, the corresponding suggestions that are probably beneficial to overcoming the challenges will be proposed, which intends to generate a positive impact on promoting Chinese students' oral English proficiency. Finally, the limitations will be presented.

2. The Common Challenges with English Learning Faced by Chinese Students

2.1. Dumb English

The national English curriculum standards have been launched since 2001, and aim to develop students' pragmatic competence and communicative skills. However, Chinese students are still significantly undergoing "dumb English" (or "mute English") which refers to the phenomenon generated by a certain English teaching model that emphasises the achievement of written examinations, but neglects oral competence cultivation [3]. With a relatively low level of oral English proficiency, the students might be unable to express themselves appropriately in English, and feel afraid to speak English. Thus, few students voluntarily participate in interactive activities in English classes [5]. Instead, the majority of them tend to keep silent while expressing themselves or communicating with others.

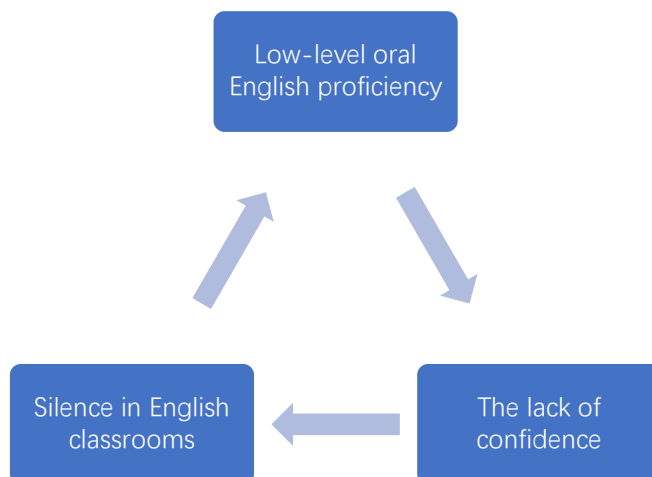


Figure 1. A vicious circle of the relationship between the three issues

Figure 1 shows the relationship between low-level oral English proficiency, the lack of confidence and the silence in English classrooms, which appears to be a vicious circle. It could be seen that dumb English or silence in English classrooms implies a low level of participation in interactive activities, which results in a negative impact on the students' achievement of oral English [5]. Because of the lack of oral English proficiency, students might feel less confident to speak English, which probably leads students to be more likely to keep silent in English classrooms. As a result, a lower level of oral English proficiency would be produced again, which seems to end up back where the negative circle started.

2.2. The Insufficient Level of Professional Quality of English Teachers

Basically, the professional quality of English teachers in China appears to be dissatisfying. Two main issues of Chinese English teachers' professional quality could be summarised.

The first problem is reflected in English teachers' actual level of English ability. The majority of English teachers' oral English proficiency is at a lower level than what level they should be [3]. A number of teachers even indicated that they can neither express themselves accurately in English, nor communicate with English speakers in daily dialogues [6]. On the one hand, phonetic errors might challenge these teachers. On the other hand, pragmatic competence is probably a significant challenge faced by the teachers, so they can hardly speak appropriate English in a certain context.

Second, the teaching capacity of Chinese English teachers might be insufficient to instruct and support students' oral English learning and practicing. Shan suggested that organizing effective oral interaction activities is beneficial to creating positive English communication environments, which could possibly reduce the anxiety of students while speaking English and encourage students to actively participate in the activities [5]. Nevertheless, the ability to conduct efficient activities is precisely what the majority of Chinese English teachers lacked [6].

2.3. The Neglect of Oral English

It has been mentioned that the teaching model in most of China's English classrooms seems to ignore the promotion of students' oral proficiency. Such a teaching model is probably due to China's English education system. Chang and Zhang both indicated that oral English competence is not assessed as a mandatory skill in China's examination system, though China's Standards of English Language Ability launched by the Ministry of Education have acknowledged the importance of oral communication competence [3,6]. In other words, the existing assessment and examination system in China may fail to match the changed demand for students' English competence.

Due to the absence of examinations for students' oral English competence and the limited use of oral English in most students' future career, a number of teachers and students do not perceive oral English as a necessary skill that needs to be developed. These teachers teach students for the purpose of achieving higher scores in written examinations. The students learn English for extrinsic reasons such as passing examinations and higher scores, where oral proficiency does not seem to be required. It seems that neither teachers nor students are aware of the importance of oral English competence.

3. The Factors Aggravating the Above-mentioned Challenges

3.1. Foreign Language Anxiety

As has been presented previously, quantities of Chinese students are experiencing dumb English, which might be in part attributed to the psychological barrier, and foreign language (FL) anxiety. FL anxiety is usually regarded as a form of anxiety in the specific context where FL learners need to express thoughts or communicate with others in a foreign language [7]. As they suggested, FL anxiety could be considered based on four main aspects, that are, passive attitudes to the classroom, fear of communication, fear of low-level assessment and examination anxiety. These four problems appear to lower the willingness of students to participate in in-class activities. Students tend to be more

willing to keep silent, which perhaps implies students have fewer opportunities to practice improving their oral proficiency.

What is supposed to be concerned is a number of Chinese students are significantly challenged with FL anxiety, which may lead to a lower level of participation among these students in oral English practicing activities [4,7]. In addition, the students perhaps feel less motivated or interested to learn and speak English actively, because of FL anxiety. As a result, oral proficiency tends to be difficult to improve. In fact, FL anxiety probably not only limits the improvement of oral proficiency, but also negatively affects overall learning achievement [7].

3.2. Educational Resources

Educational resources could be basically regarded as teachers and teaching facilities. As previously mentioned, the professional quality of Chinese English teachers may not have attained the expected level. However, this problem might not need to be considered in a large number of regions, instead, the lack of English teachers is mostly a concern, particularly in rural areas [6]. The causes of the dearth of English teachers varied, such as huge job stress, large-scale lectures, adverse teaching conditions and low salaries which might be the primary reason [8]. A large quantity of those who speak proficient English is more likely to choose other jobs in developed regions, in which they could be offered much higher salaries [1]. Additionally, limited educational resources may lead to fewer opportunities for in-service teachers to obtain further professional training. In terms of teaching facilities, a number of schools in certain areas may lack smart teaching devices, but a few regions do not even have basic facilities to support students such as audio devices to practice English listening or spacious classrooms to conduct English communication [6].

3.3. Education System

The education system in China seems to be the leading factor contributing to the relatively low level of oral English proficiency. To be fair, the curriculum reform of English pedagogy in China has made efforts to promote students' oral English proficiency to a certain extent, which might have demonstrated the Chinese Ministry of Education's purpose that students are expected to apply English in actual communication and interaction [1]. However, there are still several issues existing in China's education system, which could probably not be neglected.

3.3.1 Lack of assessment of oral English competence

In China, Gaokao, the college entrance examination is the prime access for students to enter universities. It could be claimed that Gaokao to a great extent determine whether Chinese students (not everyone but most of them) can be admitted to universities or not, and what level of universities they can enter. Hence, Chinese students and their parents attach great importance to Gaokao. For this reason, the majority of teachers' teaching activities and even the whole education system instruct students to achieve higher outcomes in Gaokao, namely, students' ultimate achievement in Gaokao tends to be the centre of teaching purposes [1].

This paper is not intended to critique the system based on Gaokao (because there might be a certain extent of the rationality of Gaokao in China's social background). However, the system may still lead to a problem in that the competence not assessed by Gaokao would probably be ignored in both teaching and learning activities. Foreign language (English mainly) is one of the compulsory subjects examined in Gaokao, but oral proficiency is not comprised. It might imply that students are less likely to spend their time on oral English learning, unless they are personally interested in English. Nevertheless, the level of Chinese students' interest in English learning or intrinsic motivation is explicitly low [9]. Instead, most of them learn English for extrinsic purposes such as obtaining higher scores. Therefore, students would focus on the competence that can directly help them attain higher scores in examinations rather than oral competence.

Meanwhile, teachers are forced by students and schools to pay more attention to improving students' general grammar knowledge, written proficiency and problem-solving ability [6]. Under

this pressure, teachers might have little or no motivation to train students' oral competence, and have insufficient time to create effective oral communication environments for students.

3.3.2 Teacher-centred teaching model

To quickly convey knowledge and improve students' learning achievement, China's English classrooms in the actual situation are teacher-centred in most cases prior to college, despite the ideal teaching model encouraged by National English Curriculum Standards in China being student-centred and teacher-instructed [4,10]. Under this teaching model, imparting knowledge beneficial to improving learning scores appears to occupy an amount of in-class time, which probably implies there is insufficient time to conduct certain activities or conversations to practice oral English [3].

Besides, the teacher-centred teaching model places students in a passive situation of learning, where students possibly play a role as a knowledge receiver, but students' actual learning purposes or requirements tend to be potentially ignored [6]. In this situation, even those who would like to develop their oral English proficiency, can hardly obtain effective support from teachers or schools.

4. Suggestions for Improving English Oral Proficiency in China's Context

4.1. Teaching Strategies Applied in English Classrooms

Based on the previous research, several suggestions for innovating teaching models in English classrooms are provided as follows, which aim to help teachers promote more positive English communication environments.

The first one is providing more positive feedback in the interaction in English classrooms. Teachers could probably reduce the students' anxiety about speaking English and maintain effective interaction between teachers and students, by adopting certain strategies. For example, positive comments on students' ideas, repeating students' words, providing detailed feedback and asking further questions [11]. In this way, a positive English interaction atmosphere can probably be created, in which students might feel more confident and motivated to express their thoughts in English in front of their teachers and peers.

The second approach that could be used to improve students' oral proficiency is task-based language teaching (TBLT). TBLT in L2 learning refers to an aim-oriented teaching method, where students interact in the target language for achieving certain goals prearranged by instructors [10]. This approach could possibly provide more opportunities for students to practice their oral English. In addition, students' intrinsic motivations and active attitudes toward English learning tend to be stimulated through the activities in TBLT [10].

These two teaching strategies seem to locate students in more frequent and practical English interactions, which is seen to be beneficial to facilitating oral English proficiency. Nevertheless, applying these teaching strategies in China's English education still is still facing several challenges such as the large class size, lack of corresponding teaching/learning materials and teacher-centred teaching model.

4.2. Supporting More Education Fund

In terms of the low level of teaching conditions and the treatment of English teachers in China, more education budget from the Chinese government appears to be required. In particular, a larger amount of education funds may be supposed to be allocated to underdeveloped regions such as rural areas. Suppose more fund is supported, the local governments and schools perhaps can provide more fundamental and even advanced teaching facilities to improve teaching conditions. Besides, teachers could gain a higher level of salaries and more welfare, which tends to promote the willingness of proficient English speakers to become teachers [1]. Furthermore, more education funds can be used to provide a larger number of opportunities for teachers to participate in in-service training or learning. This might be meaningful to improve teachers' oral English competence and pedagogical capacity, which seem to be ultimately beneficial to cultivating students' oral proficiency.

4.3. Boosting the Curriculum Reform

Although the curriculum reform has been implemented over 20 years, in which oral English proficiency and English communication competence are both emphasised, the actual implementation may not attain the level that is supposed to [1]. A significant reason for that is probably that the importance of oral English is emphasised, but there is no assessment to force teaching and learning activities to work for this English education purpose. As a result, mandatory evaluations for oral English might be required to be embedded into Gaokao (China's college entrance examination). In addition, student-centred and teacher-instructed teaching models may need to be implemented to a larger extent in practice, to substitute for the traditional teacher-centred teaching model. Subsequently, the teaching strategies suggested previously could probably be easier to be adopted under the student-centred teaching model, which is actually corresponding to the expectation of English education proposed by the national English curriculum standards in China [10].

5. Limitations

There might be two limitations in this paper. Primarily, oral English seems to be an unnecessary ability for students who would like only to study English for the purpose of attaining higher scores in examinations, and oral English proficiency may be useless in their future careers. Therefore, the findings of this paper might be helpless for these students. Besides, this paper appears to neglect the challenges or obstacles impeding the actual implementations of the suggestions presented above, where the future research could possibly pay more attention to this aspect.

6. Conclusion

By reviewing the former studies with respect to oral English learning in China's English classrooms, three common challenges with English learning of Chinese students have been revealed at first, namely, dumb English, the insufficient level of professional quality of English teachers and the neglect of oral English. It could be concluded that Chinese students seem to be widely suffering from the above challenges, so the level of their oral English could not achieve the level they should be.

Afterwards, the possible factors that aggravate the challenges were figured out. Firstly, foreign language anxiety appears to be an important factor that intensifies dumb English in China's English classrooms. Secondly, scarce educational resources may lead to not only the dearth of necessary teaching facilities but also the lack of English teachers, especially well-trained English teachers. Thirdly, there are no mandatory examinations for oral English in China's education system, which perhaps results in the low level of importance attached by both teachers and students to oral English. In addition, the teacher-centred teaching model might lead teachers and students to spend much less time cultivating oral English capacity.

Finally, certain possible approaches to facilitate the oral English proficiency of Chinese students were suggested. At first, two teaching strategies for English teachers were presented, which are, offering more positive feedback while interacting with students in classrooms and task-based language teaching strategy. The following two suggestions are both proposed toward the Chinese government. First, more education fund is supposed to be supported, to improve teaching facilities and supply sufficient well-trained English teachers. The second one is boosting the curriculum reform which is to set mandatory examinations in Gaokao and reinforce the implementation of the student-centred and teacher-instructed teaching model. In conclusion, this paper recommends that the practice of English education in the future seems to be expected to meet the increasing need for proficient oral English, where the whole education system is required to pay more attention to oral English education, and the teaching strategies may need to emphasise the practice of the communication and interaction in English.

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