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# Analysis of Reasons for Chinese College Students' Lack of Oral English Proficiency

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## **Abstract**

*Chinese college students' lack of oral English proficiency has aroused many attentions during the College English Reform in recent years. The purpose of this article is to (a) summarize findings from the literature of challenges existed in oral English teaching in Chinese higher education and (b) find reasons for Chinese college students' lack of oral English proficiency. The overarching question of this article is what are reasons for Chinese college students' lack of oral English proficiency. Several reasons for Chinese college students' lack of oral English proficiency including teacher knowledge, students' willingness to communicate, assessment factors, and contextual constraints have been identified from the literature. This study hopes to provide references to the development of Chinese College English Reform in respect to oral English teaching.*

## **Keywords**

*Chinese college students, oral English proficiency, teacher knowledge, willingness to communicate, motivation*

## **1. Introduction**

After the failure of the Opium War (1839-1842), the Qing Feudal government realized the distance of military and technology between China and other western countries. The catastrophic military defeat urged the government to learn from western countries such as Britain, therefore in 1862 the government established the first modern school named Peking Tong Wen College (Zhang, 2007). Instead of learning traditional Chinese classics, English was a required course in this school. This historical event started the history of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in China. After that, English education in China has fluctuated but flourished during the opening reform policy beginning from the 1980s until present (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). China is now working on cultivating more fluent English speakers to actively participate in the world globalization.

In order to meet the growing demands for English proficient talents, College English has been a required course in Chinese universities and colleges for non-English major undergraduate students since the 1980s (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). Almost all of the non-English major college students are required to take College English classes during freshman and sophomore years. These non-English majors must then pass the College English Test (CET) at a certain level in order to get their bachelor degrees. College English course is designed to develop students' English language ability under four dimensions: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, due to the limited resources and time only listening, reading, and writing skills are assessed during the College English Test (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). Students major in English, although they do not have to take the College English course, are required to take courses that are more extensive and demanding related to English such as English Grammar, American Literature, British Literature, Linguistics, etc. English majors are also required to pass a test designed specifically for them which is called Test for English majors (TEM) at a certain level in order to receive their bachelor degrees.

With the purpose of enhancing Chinese students' English ability, many English teaching methods have also been used along the English education history in China including Direct Instructional Teaching Method in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grammar-Translation Method during the mid-twentieth century, Audio-Lingual Method in the 1980s, Communicative Approach of the 1990s, and Task-Based Teaching Approach in recent years (Ruan & Jacob, 2009). Under the application of all these English language teaching (ELT) methods in college English education, much progress has been made. However, the current situation of Chinese college students' oral English proficiency is still far from satisfactory ((Liu and Dai 2003; Wen 1999). According to the results of a survey conducted in Hebei University of Engineering in China, 55.6 % of students lack confidence in oral English learning, 29% of students have some confidence in oral English learning, only 15.4% of students have enough confidence in oral English learning (Wei, 2012). After studying English for more than ten years, most Chinese English learners still have difficulty understanding or communicating with native English speakers (Wang, 2004).

The development of English education at Chinese higher institutions is influenced by pedagogy from English speaking countries (Hu & Lei, 2014; Liu, 2012; Lu & Ares, 2015; Sit & Chen, 2010). However, problems exist during the adaptation and assimilation of pedagogy from English speaking countries to the specific cultural, social and historical context of English education in China (Hu & Lei, 2014; Lu & Ares, 2015; Sit & Chen, 2010). Communicative language teaching is an approach to the teaching of language that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the purpose of learning a language (Daisy, 2012). A variety of activities for the communicative language teaching approach include role play, interviews, information gap, pair work, and so on (Daisy, 2012); however, many researchers have shown that a communicative language teaching approach has problems with adaptation in Chinese classrooms (Lu & Ares, 2015; Sun & Cheng, 2002; Yu, 2001). The large class size in Chinese academic settings has limited classroom space for conducting communicative language learning activities (Lu &

Ares, 2015; Yu, 2001). The limited English proficiency and lack of understanding of the communicative language teaching approach for some English teachers in China also make it difficult for teachers to implement communicative tasks (Lu & Ares, 2015; Yu, 2001). Many scholars started to question the authenticity of communicative language teaching in an international setting, and Sullivan (2000) asked the questions of “Whose reality is ‘real’?” and “What context is ‘authentic’?” (p. 120).

In response to the limited proficiency of Chinese college students’ oral English ability, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched many initiatives in the new millennium which include the College English Teaching Reform (Bai, Millwater, & Hudson, 2012). A series of educational policies related to curricula, syllabi and teaching methods have made by the Chinese Ministry of Education across the country (Hu, 2003; Zheng & Davision, 2008). The National College English Testing Committee (2006) stated that “the objective of college English is to develop students’ ability in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking.” In reality, however, the objective proved to be extremely challenging since oral English teaching in Chinese higher education has many difficulties (Chen & Goh, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to (a) summarize findings from the literature of challenges existed in oral English teaching in Chinese higher education and (b) find reasons for Chinese college students’ lack of oral English proficiency. The overarching question of this article is: what are reasons for Chinese college students’ lack of oral English proficiency? This article hopes to provide some reference to the development of Chinese College English Reform in respect to oral English teaching.

## **2. Teacher Knowledge**

The concept of “teacher knowledge” has many different explanations and understandings. Shulman (1999, p.64) classified teacher knowledge into seven domains: 1) content knowledge, 2) general pedagogical knowledge, 3) curriculum knowledge, 4) pedagogical content knowledge, 5) knowledge of learners and characteristics, 6) knowledge of educational contexts, 7) knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values, and their philosophical and historical grounds. However, when Shulman’s theory was applied to the area of English language teaching, the pedagogical content knowledge is closely related to the medium of instruction which makes the instruction different from subject-matter instruction (Freeman, 2002). Other perspectives include that “teacher knowledge” has been conceived as “practical knowledge” (Elbaz, 1981 et al.), “professional knowledge” (Tamir, 1991; Tillema, 1994), and “emotional knowledge” (Zembylas, 2007).

The first aspect of teacher knowledge which are lacked in English teaching classrooms in China is English teachers’ knowledge of English (Yu, 2001; Chen & Goh, 2011; Wei, 2012). Since most English teachers in China are non-native English speakers, many teachers believe that their knowledge of English are insufficient and are concerned about their low levels of self-efficacy (Chen & Goh, 2011). Liu and Gong’s (2000) study showed that among around 550,000 middle school (from grade 7 to grade 12) English teachers in China, only 89.4% of junior middle school (from grade 7 to grade 9) English

teachers and 55.0% of senior middle school (from grade 10 to grade 12) English teachers are professionally qualified of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English. Although English teachers feel that they are generally competent in English grammar, reading and writing, most of them are not familiar with the authentic and natural oral English that native speakers use in real life communication (Chen & Goh, 2011). Some English teachers can't express exactly what they mean by speaking English and are having difficulty judging whether students are expressing themselves in the right way or not (Chen & Goh, 2011). All of those situations are preventing English teachers in China from being competent in oral English teaching.

The second aspect of teacher knowledge which are lacked in English classrooms in China is knowledge about pedagogical methods and strategies for teaching oral English effectively (Yu, 2001; Chen & Goh, 2011; Wei, 2012; Chen & Goh, 2014; Chen, 2015). According to the results of a recent survey conducted in China, 73.4% of students believe that direct instructional teaching is the most common teaching method in English teaching classrooms (Chen, 2015). This kind of teacher-dominated traditional teaching method gives little opportunities for English learners to communicate in English during class, leads students become passive receivers of knowledge rather than active speakers of English (Wei, 2012). Since a lot of teachers only know some basic English grammar and vocabulary, the traditional grammar-translation method is the most possible choice for them because they can basically teach English in Chinese (Yu, 2001). Some teachers rely heavily on their learning experience as students which make their teaching strategies hard to meet current students' learning demands (Chen & Goh, 2011). Some advanced English teaching methods such as "blended learning" which involves applying digital technologies in the classroom also provide challenges to the improvement of teacher knowledge (Wu & Liu, 2013).

The third kind of teacher knowledge which are lacked in English teaching classrooms in China is knowledge of English learners' needs (Chen & Goh, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2014; Yazdanpanah, 2015). Some English teachers find it challenging to effectively motivate students to speak English for teachers are lacking skills in actively engaging students during oral English activities (Chen & Goh, 2011). Others report they are having difficulty choosing topics or materials that students are interested in and match students' English ability levels (Chen & Goh, 2011). A lot of teaching materials English teachers choose are out-of-date and are not practical in daily communication (Yang, 2010). Difficulties are also existed in teachers' knowledge in dealing with English learners' personalities and learning habits (Chen & Goh, 2011). Some students are active and enjoy group learning while some are introverted and prefer one-to-one discussion (Chen & Goh, 2011). Teachers' knowledge about oral English learners is also an essential part of teacher knowledge which influences English learners' oral English proficiency.

### **3. Students' Willingness to Communicate**

Except reasons from teacher knowledge in influencing students' oral English proficiency, students' willingness to communicate in English in and out of class are also factors in influencing Chinese

college students' oral English proficiency (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Wang, 2009; Wei, 2012; Yang, 2010; Yue & Li, 2012; Zhou, 2003). According to a survey conducted in a university in Shanghai, only 22% of students are willing to fully use opportunities in English class to practice English; 16% of students do not like to communicate in English during class activities, and believe the traditional direct instructional teaching method is most effective in helping them getting good grades; 21% of students, although know the answers of the questions, are not willing to put up their hands and speak their answers publicly in English classes; 41% of students prefer answering questions after being called on names by their teachers (Wang, 2009). The results of the survey reflect several major factors which influence students' willingness to communicate in English which are students' English ability, learning motivation, psychological factors and cultural factors (Chen & Goh, 2011; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Wang, 2009; Wei, 2012; Yang, 2010; Yue & Li, 2012; Zhou, 2003).

### *3.1 Students' English Ability*

Although college students have been studying English for almost ten years from elementary school until college, some students' English ability are still very limited which influence their participation in English class (Yue & Li, 2012). Common problems exist in their English learning include that students have limited English vocabulary, unclear knowledge about grammar, as well as inaccurate pronunciation and intonation (Yue & Li, 2012). Most students still need to structure their ideas in Chinese and then translate them into English which make their English fractured, stuck and difficult to understand by native speakers (Wei, 2012; Yue & Li, 2012; Zhou, 2003). Yang (2010) pointed out in her study that some students' limited English listening and speaking ability also greatly affected their participation in oral English classes. Some teachers are having difficulty arranging effective oral tasks due to students' limited vocabulary and communicative abilities (Chen & Goh, 2011). What's more, due to different resources and curriculum requirements in different regions, students from developed regions such as Beijing and Shanghai often have better oral English abilities and are more willing to communicate than students from less developed regions (Chen & Goh, 2011).

### *3.2 Learning Motivation*

Gardner and Lambert distinguish learners' motivation into two types which are integrative motivation and instrumental motivation (Wang, 2009). English learners who have integrative motivation are learning English for their own interest in the language and wish to apply the language into better communication with others; English learners who have instrumental motivation are interested in learning English in order to achieve another goal other than learning English itself, such as passing an exam or getting a new position in their career (Kim & Shallert, 2010; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Wang, 2009).

Yang (2010) investigated sixty college English learners' motivations in learning English and found that most of them have clear motivations in improving English. Further study found that some students' motivation in improving oral English are for using English in the future career while others are for getting certificates (Yang, 2010; Yue & Li, 2012). The author has a positive attitude towards students'

clear goals and believes that teachers should motivate students for having multiple motivations to benefit students' English learning (Yang, 2010). Similarly, Wang (2006) conducted a survey and found that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation benefit students' English learning. However, some researchers (Chen & Goh, 2011; Lin, 2006; Wei, 2012) found that students who have instrumental motivation for learning English such as passing the College English Test often neglect oral English learning since speaking skill cannot be assessed during the test.

### *3.3 Psychological and Cultural Factors*

Some researchers (Wei, 2012; Yue & Li, 2012) found that a lot of Chinese college students lack confidence in their oral English ability. They are worried about making mistakes while speak English especially when they are not familiar with the topic or are not confident with their English (Chen & Goh, 2011). Some students even feel ashamed to speak English because of their strong accent in pronunciation, and this causes much more difficulties in improving their oral English ability (Chen & Goh, 2011). Some students are too shy to speak in front of the public and prefer to keep their ideas reserved (Chen & Goh, 2011; Wei, 2012; Yue & Li, 2012). The feeling of inferiority and fear of speaking English caused much stress and anxiety, finally became great obstacles for their oral English proficiency (Yang, 2010; Zhou, 2003).

Cultural factors, combined with psychological factors, also limited college students' oral English proficiency (Wang, 2009). In traditional Chinese classroom, teacher is the authority of the class while students are not allowed to speak without teacher's permission (Wang, 2009). This kind of teacher-dominate teaching method and classroom environment limited students' willingness to communicate and interact with other students, thus causing a negative effect in oral English learning (Wang, 2009; Wei, 2012). What's more, many students are lack of intercultural communication skills and experience in communicating with native speakers (Dong & Chen, 2015). This factor negatively influences students' willingness to speak when college students choose to study abroad in English-speaking countries (Dong & Chen, 2015).

## **4. Assessment Factors**

Besides, the assessment of students' learning also limited college students' oral English proficiency (Wei, 2012; Yang, 2010; Zhou, 2003). Neither College English Test (CET) for non-English majors nor the Test for English Majors (TEM) include oral English as part of the tests (Wei, 2012; Yang, 2010). This causes some teachers and students pay little attention to oral English teaching and learning (Lin, 2006; Wei, 2012; Yue & Li, 2012). Oral English teaching is often given little attention on curriculum design and syllabus (Lin, 2006; Wei, 2012; Yue & Li, 2012; Zhou, 2003).

It is also common for teachers to regard the purpose of teaching College English as solely the transmission of knowledge (Gao, 2013). For many Chinese, the goal of learning English is to cultivate an educated group of scholars with a strong background in English literature rather than the competence to successfully communicate with native speakers of English (Gao, 2013). Wang (2002)

used the term “magic circle” to describe the content-driven nature of the CE curriculum in his research as “teachers teach knowledge, learners learn knowledge, the tests test knowledge; knowledge is recited before the test and is forgotten after it” (p. 30). The CET causes both positive and negative “washback” effects on English teaching and learning (Li, 2009). The CET greatly motivates teachers’ teaching and students’ learning in College English classes, however, it also leads to teachers’ teaching to the test and a more rapid teaching pace (Gu, 2005).

### **5. Contextual Constraints**

Chen and Goh (2011) reviewed literature of teachers’ difficulties of teaching oral English and identified contextual constraints such as teachers’ lack of enough instruction time, large class sizes, inadequate teaching resources, as well as growing expectations from students and parents. The College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) also causes confusion for the interpretation and understanding from English teachers because of the ambiguous and obscure references to terms without explanations of how these elements form a coherent theoretical basis for the College English curriculum (Gao, 2013). Similarly, Lamie (2006) examined teacher education and training for College English in China, and found obstacles included large class sizes, the reliance on CET, new materials, and the need for more effective teacher training. The expand enrollment of college students in recent decades increased students’ numbers in the classroom which has a negative effect on oral English instruction (Chen & Goh, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2014; Lin, 2006). Teachers report that some effective oral English activities are not practical to implement under a classroom which has up to 90 students (Lin, 2006).

### **6. Conclusions**

This literature review identifies reasons for Chinese college students’ lack of oral English proficiency from several aspects including teacher knowledge, students’ willingness to communicate, assessment factors, and contextual constraints. Literature show that teachers’ lack of knowledge in English, knowledge in pedagogical methods and strategies, as well as knowledge in identifying learners’ needs have negative influences on Chinese college students’ oral English proficiency. In addition, students’ low English ability, lack of motivation, psychological factors and cultural factors also limited college students becoming fluent English speakers. Lastly, contextual factors such as large classroom capacity, and assessment policies also cause negative influence to students’ oral English proficiency.

Due to the limited time and resources, this article still has many limitations. First of all, current literature shows different opinions on motivation in influencing college students’ oral English learning. More review of the literature should be done to investigate integrative motivation and instrumental motivation in influencing college students’ oral English proficiency. Secondly, more review of the literature should be done to analyze cultural factors in influencing college students’ oral English proficiency, especially language differences in influencing Chinese students speaking English. Thirdly, further discussion also should be done to investigate what teachers, students and policy-makers can do

in order to overcome these obstacles.

This article also provides some ideas for future research. First of all, researches study little about current status for Chinese college students' oral English proficiency after they study abroad. More research need to be done to investigate whether Chinese students' oral English proficiency have been improved after this overseas experience. Secondly, most universities and colleges in China have at least one English native speakers as oral English teachers. More research needs to be done related to native English speakers' efficacy in improving Chinese college students' oral English ability. At last, more study and review of the literature need to be done to investigate what are some effective measures for other non-English speaking countries in overcoming obstacles existed in improving college students' oral English proficiency.

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