

An Investigation into the Attitudes and Perceptions of Non-English Major Undergraduate Students and Their Teachers in Six Chinese Universities Towards the Development of Speaking Skills and Implications of the Findings for the Classroom

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Abstract: This dissertation aims to examine the perspectives of non-English major students and their teachers towards the development of speaking skills in six Chinese universities. The study begins with a detailed literature review of the features of effective speaking. Then, Chinese L2 learners' difficulties in learning English, specifically with regard to developing speaking skills, are discussed. Based on the difficulties identified, methods for improving speaking skills, including both teaching strategies and actual classroom activities are suggested. A survey is conducted by using questionnaires and interviews. To ensure maximum representation of their respective groups, 100 non-English major students and 4 English teachers with differing academic levels, based at six Chinese universities (China Youth University for Political Sciences, North China Electric Power University, Tianjin University of Finance & Economics, Henan University, Shandong University, Northeastern University) were selected from different geographic regions. In addition, the interviews with student participants are analyzed objectively in order to check whether their perceptions of their English proficiency match reality. Data is analyzed and recommendations on how to develop speaking skills for non-English major students will be made. The major findings of the study are briefly summarized as follows: the students and teachers who participated in the survey hold positive attitudes towards the teaching of speaking skills; teachers and students both had unrealistic expectations of their counter parts; although the students did not recognize it, pronunciation is a key cause of students' problems with spoken English. To some extent, it is necessary to teach spoken grammar because it can affect fluency; Listening materials can be an effective resource, which can contribute to teaching speaking skills; Many other recommendations about how to develop speaking skills can be found in the discussion.

1. Introduction

English, as a communication tool has played an increasingly important role in our fast and ever-changing society. For the first time ever, people have to use a second language for the purpose of acquiring an education or securing job opportunities. The Chinese government has recognized the vital role of English and made it a compulsory course from primary school all the way to university, but most students have not acquired adequate English speaking skills. Students should study them to improve their work prospects and communicate with English speakers.

The College Foreign Language Guidance Committee (2005), approved by China's Ministry of Education, has conducted a survey. The results show that "employers were not satisfied with the integrative English language competence of college students of recent years, particularly their competence of oral English and writing. For example, employers think that there are only 5% college students with strong oral English competence. Students whose oral English is poor or very poor make up 37% of the total." In short, most college students' oral English proficiency has not reached the requirement of the College English Syllabus or society. The above evidence represents a very common phenomenon called "Dumb English" among college students in China. Having studied English for more than 10 years, a significant number of college students cannot speak proper English.

One of the objectives of the recently revised college English teaching syllabus is to cultivate learners' comprehensive competence, in particular speaking and listening skills to ensure they are effective communicators. However, Chinese learners' speaking skills are still far from satisfactory. Moreover, it is not enough for learners to only know about pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. They must also be able to apply this knowledge in a variety of communicative contexts. The author uses the term "skills" to refer to learners' knowledge of language and communication that is "put into action" when producing speech. By researching the perceptions of students and teachers in terms of their speaking skills, the author makes various recommendations.

The overall objective of the study is to investigate the perceptions of non-English major undergraduate students and their teachers towards the teaching and learning of speaking skills in various Chinese universities, to identify whether their perceptions match reality and to propose possible suggestions as to how to develop their speaking proficiency comprehensively. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

Question: Is the present Chinese non-English major students' oral English learning situation appropriate for the students' needs?

This broad question can be divided into the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What do non-English major students perceive as their strengths and weaknesses in speaking English? Do teachers have the same perceptions?

- Research Question 2: To what extent are these perceptions accurate in terms of students' speaking skills?

- Research Question 3: What are the students' and teachers' attitudes towards their oral English classes and what can teachers and students do to improve the development of speaking skills and speaking abilities?

There are five parts to this dissertation, each of which addresses key issues, as follows: the first is the introduction, which gives the background and significance of the study. The second part reviews the current literature on the relevant issues concerned in this research. The third part reports on the multi-method approach, which was used in the study. Part 4 is the main body of the thesis. Findings and discussion of the results are presented in this section, in which both implications and suggestions are made. Finally, in chapter 5, conclusions are drawn including both limitations and some ideas for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss and critically examine the existing literature relating to speaking skills. I will discuss the factors that contribute to effective speaking. These include features of pronunciation, the use of spoken grammar, communication skills, fluency and accuracy. This will lead me to a discussion of what makes an effective speaker, looking at the arguments of different scholars and combining them with my own experience. Then, I will discuss Chinese L2 learners' difficulties specifically and make reference to my experience with them. Finally, based on the difficulties identified previously, I will discuss the methods for improving speaking skills, including both teaching methodologies and a variety of activities. Some relevant questions will also be raised in this part: how teachers choose appropriate activities for different students, and what kinds of methodologies are suitable for certain students.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of existing theories on developing speaking skills and to provide an academic base for my future research on how to develop the speaking skills of non-English majors in Chinese universities.

2.2 Features of Effective Speaking

Many attempts have been made to categorize the speaking sub-skills (Bygate, 1987; Baker and Westrup, 2003; Thornbury 2005; Hughes, 2005; Nation and Newton, 2009). However, we must first distinguish 'sub-skills' and 'strategies'. Even though both of them can contribute to the success of speaking, there are certain distinctions between them. The following items are typically considered to be 'sub-skills' of speaking, although, as far as I am aware, there is no fully agreed complete list. For instance, Goh and Burns (2012) present a list of sub-skills of speaking including "pronunciation skills", "the use of spoken grammar", "fluency", "accuracy", "interaction-management skills". On the other hand, "strategies" entail learners exploiting all available resources to get their message across, although the learners may not necessarily have good skills (Thornbury 2005). In other words, strategies are what a speaker does when he or she does not know (or cannot remember) the exact words, phrases or structures in order to communicate a particular idea. According to Thornbury (2005, p. 29-30), the following items are typically considered to be communication strategies: "word coinage", "approximation", "circumlocution", "foreignizing a word" and "paralinguistics". Avoidance and discourse strategies are also identified, as components of "strategies" and these will be discussed in more depth later on. However, the research discussed in this dissertation focuses on the non-English major students from Chinese Universities who already have some knowledge of English because they all have learned it for many years and been through the college entrance examinations. This section will focus on speaking "sub-skills" in terms of "pronunciation", "spoken grammar", "fluency" "accuracy" and "communication skills".

2.2.1 Pronunciation

Kelly (2000) claims that it causes considerable strain for listeners with a different first language (L1) to understand speakers, who persistently mispronounce certain sounds. This is supported by Baker and Westrup (2003) who suggest that pronunciation must communicate the message well enough to be understood by other English speakers. In the same way, Derwing and Munro (2005) believe that intelligible pronunciation is an important part of communication. Similarly, Jenkins (2000) claims that pronunciation is where varieties of second language (L2) differ the most and cause the most problems in communication. This is a problem for all levels of learners.

According to Kelly (2000), the study of pronunciation includes two main fields, namely phonetics and phonology. She (2000, p.9) defines phonetics as “the study of speech sounds” while phonology is mainly concerned with “how we interpret and systematize sounds”. In addition, Kelly (2000) also provides a list of the key features of pronunciation that affect intelligibility. These include correct pronunciation of phonemes (including voiced consonants, unvoiced consonants, short and long single vowels, diphthongs), and suprasegmental features (including intonation, word stress, sentence stress). It is also important to consider how sounds change in connected speech. A proficient command of these features of pronunciation may help speakers deal with communication more effectively.

Many experts claim that without stable pronunciation a word “cannot easily enter long-term memory because it cannot be held in the phonological loop”(Singleton 1999, p.148-151; Ellis and Beaton, 1993; Baddeley, Gathercole and Papagno, 1998). Different amounts of information can be held in the phonological loop at one time, depending on the learner (Nation and Newton 2009). They also found that second language learners’ knowledge of patterns of pronunciation and grammar has an impact on the size of their working memory. Therefore, developing correct and secure pronunciation and familiarization with rules and patterns is crucial.

However, as Baker and Westrup (2003) state, it is not important whether your students speak Nigerian, Bangladeshi or any of many other variations of English spoken around the world, but whether they can understand and be understood by other English speakers. This is known as mutual intelligibility. It is not necessary for language learners to sound like native speakers of a particular variety of English. What is important is whether they can understand and be understood by the local English speakers or other L2 users. However, it is not uncommon for Chinese learners of English to pursue a pure and authentic British or American accent.

2.2.2 Spoken Grammar

The features of spoken grammar may be evident in some forms of writing, especially genres that are more similar to speech than others, for instance, informal emails or internet chat. However, this type of grammar is most commonly found in speech (Timmis 2005).

Historically, the description of the properties of English grammar has largely focused on written English. However, McCarthy and Carter (1995), Guest (1996) and Timmis (2005) all suggest that it is necessary to focus on at least some spoken grammar when teaching spoken English. Recent research in corpus linguistics (Brazil 1995, Biber et al 1999, Carter and McCarthy 2006) has done much to highlight ways in which spoken discourse employs grammatical forms, which often differ from written forms. As Cullen and Kuo (2007, p.363) state, spoken grammar is “the manifestation of systematic grammatical phenomena in spoken discourse that arise from the circumstances in which speech (e.g. conversation) is characteristically produced”. Biber et al. (1999) and Leech (2000) believe that speech, unlike writing is adapted in various dynamic and often ingenious ways to cope with the demands of real time discourse.

The following are examples of spoken grammar skills compiled from McCarthy and Carter (1995), Carter and McCarthy (1997, 2006) and Biber et al (1999), which include:

Ellipsis- ‘_____you going out?’

Discourse markers- ‘You know’, ‘I mean’, ‘like’, ‘Mind you’, ‘So’, ‘Right’, ‘OK’, ‘Well’, ‘cos’, ‘actually’

Vague language- ‘sort of...’, ‘that kind of thing’

Backchannel- ‘Mmm’, ‘Yeah’

Hesitation- ‘Err’, ‘Umm’

Heads- ‘My brother, he lives in London.’

Tails- ‘He lives in London, my brother.’

Thornbury (2005) goes on to advocate some other features of spoken grammar, which include interpersonal function tag (e.g. isn't it?) and the audible features of real-time processing (e.g. repeats, false starts and incomplete utterances). Similarly, as Nation and Newton (2009) assert, most common spoken grammars are vagueness tolerated (e.g. sort of, kind of), a lot of ellipsis (e.g. might be great, however, in writing it should be it might be great), direct speech favored and head+body+tail construction and many question tags (e.g. This is really nice, isn't it?).

Technological advances have made it considerably easier for researchers to collect samples of spoken grammar. This has in turn increased and extended knowledge and analysis of speech (Goh and Burns 2012). From the above, we can see that several scholars generally share the same view about what constitutes spoken grammar for first language users. However, for second language users, not all of these features are necessary to make them more effective. For example, ellipsis does not influence meaning or fluency. Hence, this paper will focus on the features of spoken grammar that help communication intelligibility and fluency such as, backchannelling, hesitation, discourse markers, vague language and repetition.

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