

A SURVEY ON CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SPOKEN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY¹

Pan Bingxin² and Fu Xiaoli³

Abstract: Based on the results of fieldwork research, this article attempts to explore the relation between college students' standard of spoken English and their oral English level in Chinese context. It has been found that most of the students have set unrealistic goals toward the proficiency of spoken English, which in turn hampers their initiative to participate in oral activities in and out of classroom setting. There are many possible explanations of this phenomenon, namely, the mistakenly assumed status of English, the different expectations of the English utterances in terms of linguistic accuracy on the part of speakers and listeners, and the unique Chinese conservative characters. Suggestions on countermeasures especially those that might be conducted in class are presented at the end of the article.

Key words: spoken English, Chinese students, problems

INTRODUCTION

Great social and economic changes have been taking place in China since it's opening to the outside world in the 1980s. As a result of developing international contact, especially after China's entry into WTO and the impact of global economy, English as a global language has received unprecedented attention from the Chinese people. Due to the increasingly urgent need of direct and face-to-face communication with foreigners who come to China, the role of English as an instrument in cross-cultural communication has been emphasized and reiterated.

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² **Pan Bingxin** is a professor of English and Dean of Foreign Languages College of Hebei Teachers' University, P.R. China. He got his MA at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

³ **Fu Xiaoli**, is a lecturer of Hebei Teachers' University, P.R. China.

It has been noticed that the focus of English learning is gradually shifting from the training of reading skill, once the major concerns of English learning at the time of examination-oriented education, to the long-neglected communicative competence, particularly speaking skill. The practical orientation “has brought the spoken language to the fore and made effective communication rather than simply accurate use the chief objective of language learners’ speech” (Orton 2004). In order to obtain an overall account of Chinese college students’ attitudes toward oral English practice, including their criteria of a good oral presentation, their daily performance and their concerns and worries about the improvement of this specific skill, a questionnaire was designed to investigate the conditions.

The purposes of this paper are as follows: (a) To present data about the current situation of Chinese English learners (English majors and non-English majors), (b) To analyze the underlying reasons, and (c) To explore a strategic framework based on a few of the ideas that result from second language acquisition research and to suggest some classroom techniques that contribute to desired learning outcome.

METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects:

In April 2004, 206 Chinese college students responded to a questionnaire, which included 85 English major students—juniors from the English Department of Hebei Teachers’ University, 56 non-English majors from the same university, and 65 sophomores from Shijiazhuang University of Economics.

B. The Content of the Questionnaire:

The questionnaire comprised two parts with 35 questions total in number. Part I contains 20 questions, which mainly concerned the students’ general knowledge of oral English presentation, including self-evaluation work of their oral English level, their beliefs about “good” oral English criteria, views on linguistic forms (like pronunciation, intonation, grammar) and the content of discourse. Part II has 15 questions with the focus on the students’ daily performance and some suggested underlying reasons why they behaved that way. The questionnaire was written in Chinese to ensure that everybody could understand all of the statements.

C. Data:

Of the 206 questionnaires distributed, all of them were returned, with a small number of questions unanswered, giving a very high response rate of 90 percent. The data display some remarkable common points as well as disparities among senior English majors and non-English major students in terms of many factors. The data are presented below.

	Items \ Groups	Non-English Majors	English Majors
1.	The importance of pronunciation	85%	83%
2.	Thinking highly of native speaker's accent (intonation)	84%	85%
3.	The frequent contact with foreigners	3%	5%
4.	BrE. And AmE. Speakers as the main source of contact	65%	67%
5.	The need for the use of colloquial expressions	95%	98%
6.	The focus of topics on everyday life	83%	80%
7.	Pronunciation and grammar as the aspects that need to be improved the most urgently	47%	45%
8.	Hearer's concentration on speaker's meanings	90%	94%
9.	Their English teachers being affable	99%	98%
10.	A little afraid of speaking in class	69%	67%
11.	tendency to conform with peers	82%	80%
12.	Active participation in classroom oral English practice	7.2%	6%
13.	Willingness to speak in front of audience	11.2%	16%
14.	Positive self-evaluation of one's oral English level	2.4%	4.6%

Table 1:
Shared Views Between English Majors and Non-English Majors

The data also show some remarkable differences between English majors and non-English majors as follows:

	Items	Non-English Majors	English Majors
1.	Little knowledge about English intonation	33%	7.5%
2.	In case of inadequate contact with foreigners, to listen to their utterances via multi-channels	38%	65%
3.	Negative self-evaluation of one's oral English	63%	21%
4.	The need for substantial content	34%	60%
5.	The tolerance toward grammatical mistakes	59%	80%
6.	The large amount of oral practice	1.6%	20%
7.	The passiveness in oral practice	32%	8%

Table 2:
Disparity on Many factors

FINDINGS

The data demonstrate that both English majors and non-English majors share similar views on many factors.

1. They are not confident of their oral English level.
Only 2.4% non-English major students believed their oral English is good, the figure of English major students being 4.6%.
2. They are not active in oral English class.
Returns indicated that 7.2% of non-English major respondents constantly took an active part in oral English practice in class and 6% of English major respondents reported the same thing. Many of them do not dare to speak in front of the whole class (67% of non-English major respondents expressed their fear of speaking in class and the figure for English majors investigated was 69%), though their English teachers look affable (99% of non-English major students thought so and 98% of English major students believed that).
3. They attach great importance to the linguistic forms while speaking.
Nearly half of them (47% for non-English majors, and 45% for English majors) express their great concern about the correctness of linguistic forms like grammar, pronunciation and intonation in their oral performance. However, nearly all of them (90% for non-English

majors, 94% for English majors) concentrate their attention not on the language used but on the messages conveyed. They think highly of the linguistic forms, like the speaker's pronunciation (85% for non-English majors and 83% for English majors) They believe that pronunciation is important (84% of non-English majors and 85% of English majors think highly of native speakers accent.) and so are colloquial expressions (95% of non-English majors and 98% of English majors agree for the need of using colloquial expressions).

4. They lack contact with a variety of target language speakers. The opportunities to contact foreigners are rare (3% of non-English majors and 5% of English majors have access to frequent contact with foreigners). The face-to-face communication between college students and native speakers usually occurs when they talk to their foreign teachers, among whom most are from the USA and the Great Britain (67% of non-English students and 65% of English majors reported so).
5. They tend to conform their peers. When their classmates make a performance, they will feel pressured and most of them will follow suit (82% of non-English majors and 80% of English majors reported such feelings.)

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

A. Inadequate contact with foreigners

The students investigated are from two universities located in Shijiazhuang, the capital city of Hebei province, where the local economy is kept a moderate level development. Not many foreigners could even get in touch with Chinese students.

It is obvious to most teachers that the presence or absence of the second language in the wider milieu will have a profound effect on student motivation; the opportunity to use the language and the resources available outside the classroom affect the success of language learning. Inadequate opportunities of meeting with foreigners speaking English will definitely decrease learners' desire to use it.

B. Setting the goal too high

Currently, there are debates about the globalization, localization and standardization of the English language. Some linguists argue for the only

acceptable standard (Quirk and Widdowson 1985; Quirk 1990, Denning and Leben 1995). Berns (1995) proposed some ideas to support Quirk. He believed that for non-native speakers of English, British English and American English should be the standard and norm for them and the two varieties of English should be the model in the formal learning environment.

Among the voices against the only standard of English, there is a famous "Concentric circle" theory proposed by Kachru (1985). According to him, English varieties all over the world may be grouped into inner circle, outer circle and expanded circle. The inner circle refers to the countries where English is spoken as native language. The outer circle includes the countries where English is used as a second language or official language while the countries like China, Japan, Russia where English is used as a foreign language are grouped into the expanded circle.

In China, many teachers of English tend to take British English or American English as the standard English in their teaching. Stern argues that linguistically speaking, native-like competence implies a mastery of phonology, morphology, and syntax, and an extensive knowledge of vocabulary (Stern 1992: 74).

From the fieldwork, it has been noticed that there is little difference between English majors' attitude toward the language and that of the non-English majors. Both of the groups identify native-like English oral performance as their goal of learning, which poses a problem. Long confined to the belief that a person speaking good English must sound native-like, Chinese students set the goal too high. They strive to fulfill excellence and woefully find themselves not so capable. Whenever they speak English, the idea of doing it perfectly clings to them. Pressured, they are more likely to make errors, which in turn will lead to psychological strains like embarrassment and frustration.

C. Double standard

The data of the questionnaire show that not only English majors but non-English majors focus their attention on the meaning the speakers attempt to convey in communication, ignoring and tolerating the grammatical mistakes and pronunciation errors made by them. However, when they are to express themselves in English, they are greatly concerned about the correctness of linguistic forms and the appropriateness of the language they use.

The double standard makes learners focus too much on linguistic correctness, and reduce their willingness later to engage in real communication, thus hampers the prospective speakers to actively participate in the spoken activities.

D. Chinese unique conservative character

It has been generally agreed that Chinese people are distinct from the westerners in that they are usually conservative and reserved in most cases. The students surveyed show that they are not good language learners. Subjectively speaking, the Chinese English learners lack confidence and courage to speak English outside and inside classroom.

Good language learners are characterized as willing to guess, willing to appear foolish in order to communicate, and willing to use what knowledge they do have of the TL in order to create novel utterances. In one study of a risk-taking behavior of university students, it is found that the students' risk-taking behavior was a positive predictor of students' voluntary classroom participation. It is specifically identified that an important aspect of the "affective filter" is that it enables the learner to encourage intake, or useful input. Judged by this standard, Chinese English learners are not good language learners. They tend to be passive in class, lacking self-confidence and the courage to take risk, which in turn results in the frustration in oral English learning instead of the pleasure gained from the experience.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS

Being guides in the classroom, teachers are shouldering more responsibilities than students as to achieve a better output of teaching and learning, who are supposed to take active measures to deal with the case. In our opinion, the teachers may apply the following strategies to improve students' spoken English.

A. To help the students set a realistic goal of English learning

According to Feuerstein's theory of mediation, teachers can enhance the significance and strength of learning experiences if they encourage and develop a sense of competence and goal setting in their learners. The former means "the feeling that they are capable of coping successfully with any particular task with which they are faced". The latter indicates "the ability to set realistic goals and to plan ways of achieving them" (quoted in Williams

and Burden 1997:69). We suggest English majors take British English and American English as the norm for their spoken English. For non-English majors, they may take the standard as the model in their spoken English practice. Particularly, as far as the pronunciation is concerned, as long as it is recognizable, it is acceptable. As Davies and Pearse put it “Recognizable pronunciation is necessary for speech to be intelligible” (2000:82).

In practice, teachers may introduce students different English accents to acquaint them with the way people from non-English speaking countries use English in their communication, despite their vagueness and inaccuracy of English pronunciation and structure. Students will feel relieved after they have some knowledge about how their counterparts speak English in other countries. Due to English’s status as a foreign language in China, the students will no longer force themselves to adhere to the ideal linguistic performance. Less pressured, they would generate some enthusiasm about spoken English.

B. To help the students understand the hearers’ expectation

When students want to speak English, they are greatly concerned about the correctness of their linguistic performance, including the accuracy of pronunciation, appropriate use of colloquial expressions, and grammaticality of their sentences. Speaking English poses a great challenge for them, with many students being scared and daunted.

If the students know that their audiences are patient and tolerant, focusing their attention on the main ideas of the utterance rather than the trivial linguistic mistakes, their mental burden of “losing face” will be greatly reduced. For they are assured that no matter what mistakes they might make, it will not affect listeners’ comprehension as much as they believe.

C. To establish a good class environment and involve more students

It is generally agreed that learning a language is more than acquiring knowledge; it is a matter of developing and maintaining a skill through practice. A foreign language can be learned only through learners’ participation. In the classroom, the teacher’s tasks are to direct the study of the students; provide emotional, cultural and socio-linguistic insights into the use of the language; help the students pace their learning; and monitor their progress to let them know how well they are doing. In practice teachers have to be aware of the reservations and preconceptions of their students, what they think of the

teacher, and of others' evaluation of themselves, all heavily affecting their performance in the classroom.

The teacher should try to create a relaxed atmosphere in his/her classes and make "the classroom a conversational place" (Davies and Pearse 2000:83) so most learners will not feel frightened of speaking in front of the rest of the class and do as many speaking activities as possible in pairs and groups, so that the learners can speak English without the rest of the class listening. Here are two effective ways of involving students' participation.

1. *Role-playing.*

Role-playing often arouses students' interest and can "create the motivation and involvement necessary for learning to occur" (Tompkins 1998)

2. *Small-group discussion.*

Group discussion "provides opportunities for student initiation, for face to face give and take, for practice in negotiation of meaning, for extended conversational exchange" (Brown 1994:173). It provides a non-competitive atmosphere, a sense of involvement and a sense of equality. When students are comfortable with their peers, they become more confident and take more risks.

CONCLUSION

In brief, long been a headache for Chinese students and teachers, spoken English has gained unprecedented attention from all those concerned in China. Educators and researcher along with anxious students have done much to improve the situation.

The findings of the present research on the current situation of these students' oral English indicate that despite the progress that has been made in the past decades there are still some problems and unresolved matters in this field. The data gained from fieldwork indicate that many Chinese college students are afraid of risk-taking.

Objectively, they lack adequate contact with foreigners. Subjectively, they overestimate the hearers' expectations of their performance when they communicate in English. These findings may be used to help teachers as well as students develop a realistic attitude toward the learning of spoken English. On the teachers' part, more could be done to lessen students' anxiety and enhance their motivation of speaking more in English.

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