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The Impact of Pre-Task Planning Intervention on Learners' Oral Communication: A Study Based on the Controlled Experiment Method

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Abstract: The "Belt and Road" initiative has led to a diversified and increasing demand for international talents, signifying that current foreign language teaching needs to promote the integration and interaction of online and offline methods, deeply reform classrooms, and innovate learner-centered teaching models. A survey of the language abilities of university students at 9 border-region institutions revealed that oral expression skills were the weakest among the five measured dimensions: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. Given this situation, this study employed a controlled experiment to explore and analyze the impact of pre-task planning intervention on students' learning attitudes, learning strategies, and oral communication abilities, aiming to provide insights for improving overall oral communication teaching.

Keywords: Pre-task planning; Learning strategies; Oral communication

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1. Introduction

Oral communication competence is an individual's comprehensive ability to use spoken language for effective communication, encompassing aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension [1]. In language proficiency assessments of university students in border regions, oral expression ability is the weakest area. The enhancement of their oral communication competence primarily relies on the effective allocation of educational resources, culturally sensitive teaching methods, and language practice [2]. Pre-task planning plays a crucial role in language learning. Through systematic preparation and strategy deployment, it helps students build necessary confidence and competence before actual language use, enabling them to participate more effectively in oral communication.

Pre-task planning intervention is a teaching strategy designed to help students engage in sufficient thinking

and preparation before the actual execution of a task through systematic groundwork and planning [3]. This strategy typically includes previewing learning content, discussing and planning strategies, and predicting potential challenges along with formulating solutions. Pre-task planning intervention can enhance students' self-efficacy and improve learning efficiency [4]. Furthermore, this strategy promotes the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. By training through simulated real communication scenarios, students can better cope with authentic language communication environments, thereby significantly improving their oral fluency and language accuracy.

Currently, research on pre-task planning is limited, especially concerning its impact on university students' English oral communication [5]. Overseas research, represented by Robinson and Skehan, laid the foundation for studies on task complexity and planning. Ellis's identification of subtypes of pre-task planning provides a basis for this study [6]. Li Jiu and Wang Jianhua has explored the impact of pre-task planning time and task constraints on second language writing performance [7]. Domestic research has primarily focused on written language output, with less emphasis on oral output [8]. Although previous studies found that pre-task planning can enhance fluency and complexity of language expression, they neglected the impact of pre-task planning intervention on students' learning attitudes, learning strategies, and oral communication abilities.

Therefore, this study, through a two-semester controlled experiment and employing quantitative and qualitative research methods, explores the correlation between pre-task planning and oral communication, thereby providing effective pathways to enhance learners' oral communication competence, aiming to offer insights for improving overall oral communication teaching.

2. Controlled experiment design

The subjects were two groups of students from the 2024 cohort at universities in Xinjiang, with 44 students in each group, as shown in **Table 1**. The experimental group adopted blended online-offline teaching, formative assessment, collaborative learning, and teaching strategies based on the China Standards of English Language Ability (hereinafter referred to as CSE). The control group continued with traditional teaching methods [9].

Table 1. Details of experimental subjects

Group	Teaching Methods	Number of Students
Experimental	Blended Teaching, Formative Assessment, Collaborative Learning, *CSE* Strategies	44
Control	Traditional Teaching Methods	44

The experiment was conducted over two semesters in the 2022–2023 academic year, totaling 32 teaching weeks, and was divided into three stages: pre-test, mid-test, and post-test. The pre-test mainly collected and analyzed the English scores of both groups to establish a baseline validity criterion. Questionnaires were then distributed to assess students' attitudes and learning strategies [10]. During the testing period, the control group continued with traditional teaching methods. The experimental group implemented the pre-task planning intervention, including multi-modal process assessment and oral expression strategies based on the CSE.

3. Controlled experiment methods

3.1. "Online-offline" blended teaching approach

Table 2 details the teaching methods used in various instructional phases for the experimental and control groups. The experimental group employed an innovative "online-offline" blended teaching approach, combining digital teaching tools with traditional face-to-face teaching. This aimed to enhance students' digital literacy while increasing the interactivity and practicality of course content. In contrast, the control group focused on direct instruction and standardized testing, lacking support from modern teaching technologies [11]. While stable, this traditional approach may be insufficient to fully stimulate student interest and engagement.

Table 2. Comparison of teaching methods

Teaching phase	Experimental group activities	Control group activities
Blended Teaching	Used *New Century Business English Listening and Speaking Course 1*, combined with the Rain Classroom platform for online preview and background knowledge learning. Offline classes explained key points, difficulties, and introduced discussions on social hot topics. Used Rain Classroom for cloze exercises, focused on listening parts including practical expressions, short dialogues, in-depth explanations, and interesting questioning. Analyzed sentences and paragraphs to infer contexts. Watched videos specifically filmed for the textbook covering topics like career planning, enhancing visual experience and understanding of real business scenarios.	Continued using traditional teaching methods without incorporating online resources or modern teaching strategies.
Listening Training		Traditional listening training, potentially lacking interactivity and support from modern teaching tools.
Video Learning		May have used more traditional video materials, lacking the depth and relevance of specially curated content.
Oral Communication Skills Cultivation	Conducted team collaboration and individually assigned activities, such as sentence pronunciation practice, fun dubbing, etc., using WeChat group communication and video assignments to enhance communication skills and creative expression.	Focused on traditional oral expression practice. Apart from oral tests, may not have included innovative interactive activities.

3.2. Diverse formative assessment approaches

In the experimental group, formative assessment was implemented through diverse means such as learning logs, portfolios, and dynamic classroom teaching evaluations. These methods not only helped teachers understand students' learning status and needs but also promoted communication and collaboration among students, aiding them in deeper reflection and understanding of the learning content [12]. In contrast, the control group emphasized evaluating students' academic performance through standardized tests, paying less attention to individualized learning needs and processes. While this method can quickly and conveniently measure academic levels, it overlooks important aspects such as students' creativity, collaborative ability, and self-motivation. **Table 3** below presented the comparison of formative assessment methods.

Table 3. Comparison of formative assessment methods between experimental and control groups

Assessment Stage	Experimental Group Activities	Control Group Activities
Learning Logs	Students wrote learning logs recording progress, reflecting on shortcomings, and formulating study plans. Teachers understood students' thoughts and needs via logs, adjusting strategies to enhance interaction and oral practice.	Students may have been required to write logs, but focus was more on task completion status, less used for adjusting teaching strategies.
Portfolios	Created portfolios documenting student growth experiences, stage evaluation results, and works for comprehensive assessment of progress and development level.	The control group may have only recorded grades, paying less attention to process documentation and personal growth records.
Classroom Teaching Evaluation	Implemented dynamic classroom evaluation, including oral recording feedback and peer evaluation, promoting mutual learning among students, learning from strengths, and strengthening learning motivation and confidence.	Mainly conducted teacher-led evaluations, such as mid-term/final exams and direct teacher oral feedback, rarely including student interaction or feedback loops.

3.3. Oral expression strategy training

Table 4 shows how the experimental group conducted specialized training targeting the six types of oral expression abilities described in the *CSE* through specific and diverse activity tasks. These activities aimed to improve students' practical language application ability, critical thinking, and response ability in emergencies. In contrast, while the control group's methods could improve language ability to some extent, they may be insufficient for comprehensively enhancing students' abilities in practical application, emergency response, and critical thinking. This comparison helps validate the practical teaching effectiveness of the CSE, particularly concerning oral expression.

Table 4. Comparison of teaching methods between experimental and control groups

Oral expression ability	Experimental group activities (Based on CSE)	Control group activities (Traditional teaching)
Oral description	Used scenario simulation and specific sentence pattern practice to deepen ability to describe contexts like office meetings.	May have only used textbooks and standard questions for description practice.
Oral narration	Used keywords and blackboard writing to help students retell content, strengthening comprehension and expression of listening materials.	Primarily relied on teacher explanation and individual student memorization/ retelling.
Oral explanation	Used video learning and group shadowing to improve accuracy and clarity of expression in emergencies.	Traditional demonstration and shadowing, lacking emergency response training.
Oral instruction	Used maps and travel brochures for practical instruction practice, enhancing practical application ability.	Taught instructions through standardized materials, lacking practical application.
Oral discourse/ presentation	Used debates and case analysis to enhance students' critical thinking and expressive ability.	Traditional classroom lectures and simple example problems, lacking in-depth analysis and discourse.
Oral interaction	Used oral presentations and peer evaluation to enhance interaction and feedback, improving communication efficiency.	Traditional classroom interaction, lacking systematic evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

4. Analysis of controlled experiment results

The research results indicate that implementing pre-task planning can significantly enhance students' self-

efficacy. This effect is manifested indirectly through learning behaviors (such as effort, persistence, and seeking help), cognition (such as strategy use and metacognition), and motivation (such as interest, values, and affect).

4.1. Analysis of questionnaire results

Table 5 shows the reliability test results of the Oral Self-Efficacy Questionnaire administered to 44 university students. The calculated Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.891$ (> 0.8), indicating high internal consistency of the questionnaire, signifying high reliability suitable for assessing students' oral confidence levels.

Table 5. Reliability analysis of oral self-efficacy questionnaire

Sample Size	Number of Items	Cronbach's α Coefficient
44	4	0.891

Table 6 shows the results of the one-sample t-test. The mean scores for all four questionnaire items reached statistical significance, with p-values far below 0.01. This indicates that the subjects generally expressed a certain level of confidence in various oral tasks, particularly in expressing views on professionally related topics (Mean = 3.045). It also suggests potential for further improvement in oral self-efficacy.

Table 6. One-sample t-test analysis results

Item	Sample Size	Min	Max	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	*t*	*p*
I can describe personal experiences in detail and accurately express personal feelings.	44	1.0	5.0	2.886	0.813	23.546	0.000**
I can express my views on social hot topics in an organized manner after preparation.	44	1.0	5.0	2.955	0.861	22.751	0.000**
I can effectively communicate or negotiate orally on daily life matters such as business, tourism, shopping, etc.	44	1.0	5.0	3.023	0.876	22.896	0.000**
After preparation, I can briefly express opinions on topics related to my major, logically presenting viewpoints and highlighting main ideas during the presentation.	44	1.0	4.0	3.045	0.776	26.025	0.000**

Table 7 displays the English oral test scores of the experimental group over two semesters. The average oral score improved from 84.318 to 85.295, and the standard deviation decreased from 10.483–9.167. This indicates that oral performance became more consistent and showed slight improvement. This enhancement reflects the effectiveness of the teaching methods and the gradual strengthening of students' oral abilities.

Table 7. Basic indicators of English oral tests

Semester	Sample Size	Min Score	Max Score	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Median
First Semester	44	60	96	84.318	10.483	88
Second Semester	44	55	97	85.295	9.167	88

4.2. The impact of pre-task planning intervention

Students did not fully recognize the importance of reflection and summarization for improving their learning ability. A shift from initial active participation to gradual passivity was observed, suggesting traditional methods

may fail to sustain learning motivation and maintain long-term enthusiasm. Under traditional teaching, students might focus more on completing assigned tasks, paying insufficient attention to enhancing practical language skills through diversified learning methods. For example, students with lower self-efficacy tended to avoid complex oral tasks and were unwilling to engage in extra language practice outside class. Improvements in oral expression ability were likely limited. While students with higher self-efficacy might exert extra effort to improve, those with lower self-efficacy appeared more hesitant and less confident in oral expression. Traditional teaching methods generally failed to fully mobilize all students' learning motivation, particularly those with lower self-efficacy.The implementation significantly impacted students' learning methods, oral expression ability, and overall learning outcomes. It increased student participation, enhanced their self-efficacy, and improved language skills and learning experiences.

4.2.1. Impact on students' learning strategies

Within the experimental group, through interaction with peers and teachers, students were able to select and adopt learning strategies more suited to themselves. This strategic choice was reflected not only in the improvement of oral expression ability but also in the enhancement of students' overall attitude and interest towards language learning. **Table 8** shows students' choices of strategies during oral communication tasks, aiding in the analysis of differences and commonalities in students' strategic choices during the oral communication process. Students in the experimental group showed particularly prominent strategy usage, demonstrating high receptiveness to oral expression strategies. For example, 81.82% of students stated they could reasonably adjust speech content through preparation or rehearsal to enhance effectiveness, while 79.55% could use props or media to help listeners better understand. The data also show that students in the experimental group exhibited positive attitudes towards evaluation and remedial strategies, with 65.91% able to avoid misunderstandings by rephrasing to emphasize key points. Compared to the control group, students in the experimental group displayed more proactive and adaptive behavior in adopting and applying learning strategies, reflecting the positive impact of the pre-task planning intervention. This teaching intervention promoted their adoption of more diverse and effective learning strategies during the learning process, leading to better performance.

Table 8. Students' learning strategy choices

Strategy description	Count	Percentage
Can reasonably adjust speech content through preparation or rehearsal to enhance expression effectiveness.	36	81.82%
Can timely summarize discussion content to ensure it stays on topic.	27	61.36%
Can ask questions to confirm if the other party understands the content of their conversation.	28	63.64%
Can use props, digital media, or visual aids to help listeners better understand the speech content.	35	79.55%
Can actively adapt to others' language habits (e.g., using internet slang) to facilitate smooth communication.	22	50.00%
Can use common sentence patterns or fillers (e.g., "I mean...").	28	63.64%
When encountering difficulties in expression, can use methods like paraphrasing, giving examples, or literal translation to convey meaning indirectly.	20	45.45%
Can politely request speaking opportunities during formal discussions.	23	52.27%
Can accurately use non-verbal means (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions, body language) to assist expression based on communication content and needs.	28	63.64%
Can emphasize key points by rephrasing to avoid misunderstandings.	29	65.91%
Can self-correct verb tense errors promptly during oral expression.	19	43.18%

4.2.2. Impact on students' oral ability

According to **Table 9**, 88.64% of students in the experimental group believed that the diverse teaching methods helped improve their oral ability; 75% felt that teamwork promoted their progress; 63.64% reported an increase in their interest in learning English; 56.82% believed their confidence in learning English was enhanced. These differences reflect the effectiveness of diverse teaching methods and active teaching interventions in improving students' English oral ability.

Table 9. Student feedback on the impact of the teaching model

Option	Percentage
This model helps improve oral ability.	88.64%
Enhanced confidence in learning English.	56.82%
Increased interest in learning English.	63.64%
Promoted teamwork with classmates.	75%

Table 10 and **Table 11** compare the score distributions of the control group and the experimental group respectively. The control group's scores (**Table 10**) were mainly concentrated in the higher ranges, with 16 students (36.36%) in the 80–89 range and 24 students (54.55%) scoring 90 or above. The average score was 88.61 with a standard deviation (SD) of 6.88. This indicates the control group's performance was generally good, but scores varied considerably. In contrast, the experimental group (**Table 11**) had a higher proportion of students scoring 90 or above (60.00%). However, their average score was slightly lower (87.4), and the standard deviation was higher (8.48), indicating a more dispersed score distribution. These differences suggest that the experimental group's teaching methods offered some advantage in helping students achieve higher scores, particularly noticeable in the highest score range. However, the higher dispersion in the experimental group's scores suggest the teaching methods may have had a more varied impact on different students. This necessitates further adjustments to teaching methods to ensure more balanced educational outcomes for all students.

Table 10. Score distribution of control group

Score Range	< 60 (Fail)	60–69	70–79	80–89	≥ 90	Cheating	Absent
Count	0	1	3	16	24	0	0
Percentage	0.00%	2.27%	6.82%	36.36%	54.55%	0.00%	0.00%
Mean (M)	88.61						
Std. Dev. (SD)	6.88						

Table 11. Score distribution of experimental group

Score Range	< 60 (Fail)	60–69	70–79	80–89	≥ 90	Cheating	Absent
Count	0	2	8	8	27	0	0
Percentage	0.00%	4.44%	17.78%	17.78%	60.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Mean (M)	87.4						
Std. Dev. (SD)	8.48						

5. Conclusion

This study employed a controlled experiment method to conduct a detailed investigation and analysis of oral self-efficacy and English oral communication ability among university students in border regions. By implementing pre-task planning intervention and CSE-based teaching strategies, the research found that students in the experimental group showed significant improvement compared to the control group in terms of learning strategy choices and oral communication ability. These achievements not only demonstrate the effectiveness of diverse teaching strategies but also highlight the important role of teaching innovation in promoting the development of students' comprehensive language application abilities. However, this study selected students from the same university, which may not represent a broader relevant population. Secondly, the study primarily explored the impact of pre-task planning intervention on oral communication participation, self-efficacy, and motivation; other factors warrant further investigation. Thirdly, the study adopted a dichotomy, categorizing oral tasks as simple or complex, which may not suit all learners. Future research could consider adopting a more refined grading standard. This would help analyze the specific effects of pre-task planning intervention more meticulously, thereby providing more precise reference suggestions for teaching practice.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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