

A Review of the Causes and Teaching Strategies for Insufficient Spoken English Fluency among Chinese University Students

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Abstract: Improving the fluency of spoken English is one of the goals in English teaching in Chinese universities; however, it is difficult to achieve in practice. This investigation reveals that the difficulty in accomplishing this goal is caused by the combined effect of three closely related factors: firstly, the cultural and psychological obstacles brought by the Confucian educational tradition; secondly, the current curriculum, which has always emphasized reading and writing and ignored listening and speaking; thirdly, the lack of chances for real spoken communication in English classes of universities. By thoroughly studying relevant domestic and foreign literature, this paper expounds on the above-mentioned three main reasons and summarizes the major teaching approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBL), and corrective feedback systems. The research indicates that although these methods are effective under certain circumstances, their application in Chinese universities cannot be directly adopted and should be modified according to the local teaching conditions. Furthermore, this paper highlights that there is a shortage of previous research: little effort has been made to construct a complete explanatory framework that integrates the three aspects of culture, curriculum, and classroom practice. This gap serves as the foundation and the main contribution of this review.

Keywords: English speaking fluency; Language anxiety; Confucian learning culture; Communicative approach; Task-based approach; Chinese higher education

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1. Introduction

For decades, spoken English proficiency has been regarded as an important criterion for evaluating the success of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). But for Chinese college students, poor oral expression ability is the main disadvantage in their English study. It is a common situation that although many Chinese college students have a good ability to understand and write in English, they find it difficult to make fluent

and natural English sentences in actual oral communication. This difference between the receptive and productive skills has been frequently reported and studied by scholars ^[1].

This problem has been paid special attention to at the governmental level. The newly published *College English Teaching Guidelines (2020)* by the Ministry of Education requires that university English teaching should mainly concentrate on improving students' abilities in using language effectively ^[2], with particular importance given to enhancing their oral expression and communication skills. Nevertheless, there still exists a significant difference between the proposed policies and the actual teaching methods: in many English classes of Chinese universities, the emphasis is still on the instruction of grammar and preparation for written examinations, while practical communicative speaking activities are very scarce. It is urgent to solve the contradiction between the policy objectives and the teaching situations.

A lot of research has been done in the academic world about this problem. The scholars of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) have investigated the influence of genuine communicative activities on improving oral fluency ^[3,4]; the researchers in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBL) have shown that structured oral tasks are beneficial for the development of fluency ^[5,6]; Studies on language anxiety have also indicated the psychological obstacles which hinder the Chinese students from participating in class ^[7,8]. However, most of the above-mentioned studies have been carried out separately, with little effort to establish a comprehensive explanatory framework integrating the three aspects of cultural psychology, curriculum organization, and classroom practice.

This discrepancy in the literature has led us to carry out the present study. Instead of considering fluency difficulties as a sole methodological issue which can be resolved by introducing a new teaching approach, this paper suggests that any successful intervention should initially investigate the fundamental reasons at three interrelated aspects: (1) the cultural and psychological aspect, where the Confucian belief in self-control and the fear of public mistakes inhibits oral expression; (2) the curriculum level, where the usual sequence of English skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking—in a fixed order makes speaking less important from the beginning of learning; and (3) the classroom practice level, where inadequate real oral communication fails to enable the students to acquire the automatism necessary for fluent speech. By analyzing these three levels simultaneously, our paper intends to give a more detailed description of the problem and to assess the existing teaching methods with a higher degree of critical accuracy compared to single-point reviews.

2. Root causes of spoken fluency difficulties among Chinese university students

2.1. Cultural and psychological inhibition

To know why Chinese university students do not speak English in class, we must consider the cultural background of the problem. The Confucian educational ideas have greatly affected the educational tradition in China for a long time; their main principles are self-control, humility, respect for authority, and avoidance of mistakes in public. In this cultural environment, to express oneself in class, especially in a foreign language where errors occur frequently, involves certain social risks. An incorrect answer is not only an academic error but may also cause embarrassment from classmates and teachers ^[9].

This behavior in the class reflects the above-mentioned cultural characteristics. Most students who hold communicative ideas tend to keep silent rather than risk failure in public. Liu and Littlewood observed that the reticence in class participation of Asian university students is not mainly due to language limitation ^[10],

but to the well-established social norms regarding proper behavior in educational environments. Specifically in the Chinese situation, Wen and Clement pointed out that face-saving (*mianzi*) is an important psychological factor influencing the willingness of the learners to communicate, and they suggested that any teaching method intended to improve oral participation should take into consideration this cultural fact ^[11].

It is important to note that attributing this to cultural factors may lead to overgeneralization. Not all Chinese students have the same reserved personality; there are considerable individual differences in personality traits, previous learning experiences, and learning motivation ^[12]. Moreover, regarding speaking difficulties mainly due to cultural factors might ignore other contributory factors which are more suitable for educational improvement, such as the curriculum and classroom procedures. Hence, this paper considers cultural-psychological inhibition as one of the three contributing factors, not as the only explanation.

2.2. Structural imbalance in the English curriculum

A second, and possibly more basic, cause of spoken fluency problems in China is the arrangement of language skills teaching in the Chinese education system. The traditional order of language skills in Chinese schools—reading, writing, listening and speaking—presents a long-term educational concept that considers spoken language as a secondary result of literacy acquisition instead of a primary communication skill to be developed independently ^[1]. This order has significant effects on the oral ability of the students when they begin their university studies.

During the primary and secondary school periods in China, the English teaching mainly relies on the grammar-translation method and is influenced by the examination-oriented content, with the gaokao (college entrance examination) being the main criterion for evaluation. As the gaokao originally tested reading comprehension, vocabulary, and written composition, but gave less importance to oral performance, both the teachers and students distributed their learning efforts accordingly. According to many researchers, the consequence is a group of university students who can analyze complicated grammatical structures and read academic papers, but find it difficult to produce even simple conversational sentences under the pressure of real communication ^[3,10].

A secondary result of this educational disparity is the phonological deficiency. Many Chinese students who enter university have learned a lot of English by reading, but have little practice in pronouncing the language orally. They can recognize a word in a book, but cannot produce or even identify it in a conversation. The gap between the written and spoken forms of the language causes a special difficulty in fluency which is distinct from the common communication anxiety, and thus requires special phonological training as an element of any remedial scheme ^[13].

2.3. Insufficient authentic oral practice in the classroom

Although the problems of cultural inhibition and curricular priorities have been solved, there is still another difficulty in the daily class work of Chinese university English courses: the opportunities for genuine and continuous oral communication are very restricted. The class sizes in Chinese universities usually vary from 40 to 60 students or more, which is difficult for each student to obtain sufficient speaking time in one lesson of 90 minutes ^[1]. When oral activities do take place, they generally consist of short and planned conversations, such as reading aloud, giving one-word answers to displayed questions, or performing memorized dialogues, instead of the free and purposeful interaction required for improving fluency according to second language acquisition research ^[6].

Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis provide a theoretical basis for understanding the significance of this problem ^[14,15]. Krashen considered comprehensible input as the primary factor in language acquisition, while Swain, from her research on French immersion students in Canada, pointed out that input alone was not enough; the learners needed chances to produce extended output, which would overcome their present linguistic abilities. In the common English class of a Chinese university, both conditions are usually not fulfilled: the input is generally at or below the students' present level, and there are few and short-term chances for productive output.

The effects of these three factors, including cultural restrictions, an uneven curriculum and insufficient practice, constitute a continuous cycle. The students who seldom speak English in class have a bad feeling about their oral expression ability; this bad feeling results in more anxiety; anxiety reduces their desire to participate; and the decreased participation keeps the lack of practice. Breaking this cycle therefore requires interventions that simultaneously address the psychological, structural, and practical dimensions of the problem.

3. Teaching strategies for improving spoken English fluency

3.1. Communicative language teaching (CLT) and its adaptation in China

Communicative Language Teaching emerged in the 1970s as a response to the perceived limitations of grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods, which critics argued produced learners who could manipulate linguistic forms but were unable to use the language for genuine communicative purposes. Drawing on Hymes' concept of communicative competence ^[16]—the ability not only to produce grammatically correct sentences but to use language appropriately in social context—CLT reoriented language teaching around meaning-focused interaction, authentic communicative tasks, and the development of fluency alongside accuracy ^[4].

In the Chinese higher education system, CLT has been difficult to carry out in its original Western way. Hu pointed out several obstacles, including the large number of students in a class, which makes pair and group work impractical; the cultural customs that regard the teacher as the main authority and the students as passive learners; the lack of teacher training in CLT methods; and the existence of a competitive examination system which values correctness over communication. Similarly, Liu and Littlewood also observed that most Chinese students, when faced with open-ended communicative tasks, remained silent or gave only brief responses, not because of their language ability but due to their uncertainty about the behavior in this new teaching pattern.

These restrictions do not indicate that CLT is unsuitable for use in China, but they imply that the adoption of purely Western communicative methods is unlikely to be successful. Rao showed that by appropriately modifying the principles of CLT according to the Chinese classroom situation, such as using small-group discussions instead of whole-class interactions, offering clear task arrangements and preparation periods before oral activities, and explicitly teaching students how to carry out communicative conversations, the oral participation rate of the students and their self-reported fluency both increased significantly. This result indicates that the main issue is not about the effectiveness of CLT in China, but about how it should be modified to be applicable. Further research may gain more benefits from systematically documenting the successful adaptations of CLT in particular Chinese educational environments.

3.2. Task-based language teaching (TBL) and fluency development

Task-Based Language Teaching, developed from the theoretical foundations of CLT by Long, Nunan, Ellis, etc. ^[6,17,18], implements communicative principles by means of the design of certain educational tasks which make the learners use the target language to accomplish a specified communicative result. Unlike the open-ended CLT activities, TBL gives the learners definite task objectives, designated roles, and assessable results, which decreases the ambiguity that Chinese students usually encounter in pure communicative forms.

For fluency improvement, the four-three-two (4/3/2) method proposed by Nation is one of the most empirically supported techniques used in the teaching of speaking. In this method, a student speaks the same prepared text to three consecutive partners, decreasing the time from four minutes to three and then to two. The repetition of the same material under less time pressure makes the speaker speak faster, decrease hesitations, and improve the automaticity of phonological and syntactic productions - all of which are parts of fluency according to Nation and Newton. This method is especially suitable for the Chinese classroom since it gives a framework and preparation time, thus reducing the anxiety caused by impromptu speech, but still creates real-time pressure which promotes fluency development.

Information-gap activities, role plays, and project-based oral presentations are also used in Chinese college English classes with reported benefits on students' participation and oral production ^[19]. Nevertheless, it has been found repeatedly in the TBL literature that the difficulty of the tasks should be adjusted properly: tasks which are beyond the present language and cognitive abilities of the learners will lead to avoidance instead of challenging output, whereas too easy tasks cannot provide sufficient communication pressure for improving fluency ^[20]. In big and mixed proficiency classes in Chinese universities, it is especially hard to carry out accurate task adjustment, which is a main practical restriction of TBL when applied conventionally.

3.3. Corrective feedback and its role in oral fluency development

The role of corrective feedback in oral language development is one of the main subjects discussed in SLA research ^[6,21]. Lyster and Ranta conducted a study on French immersion classrooms and classified six kinds of corrective feedback: explicit correction, recasts, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. They found that the effectiveness of these feedback types in improving the learners' performance was quite different. Among them, elicitation, where the teacher points out an error and asks the student to correct himself, resulted in the highest success rate of self-correction, whereas recasts, although the most commonly used type of feedback, were seldom considered as corrective by the learners.

For the development of fluency, the time and direction of corrective feedback are very important. Brumfit made an influential difference between two types of activity phases ^[22], namely fluency-focused and accuracy-focused, and stated that the interruption of corrective feedback during fluency-focused activities would affect the speech flow and fail to achieve the purpose of the activity. Thornbury also supported this idea, suggesting that teachers should adopt a delayed feedback policy during fluency activities ^[23], pointing out that errors should be discussed after the activity instead of interrupting the communication process, and giving immediate correction only in the accuracy-focused practice phases. This method is especially suitable for the Chinese situation, where the students' fear of public mistakes has become a major obstacle to their participation in oral speeches; immediate correction of errors in front of classmates may strengthen their avoidance rather than help them improve.

Peer feedback has received increasing research interest as an addition to the teacher's correction. Sato and Lyster indicated that under the condition of structured peer interaction ^[24], where students are taught to

give and receive feedback on each other's oral productions, there are notable improvements in both fluency and accuracy compared to the control groups. The possible reason may be the decrease in evaluative anxiety; students are more likely to take communicative risks with their peers than with teachers, which leads to more meaningful outputs. In the Chinese college English class, where the teacher-student ratio makes individualized teacher feedback impractical, peer feedback structures provide a feasible way to enhance the amount and quality of oral communication.

3.4. Affective factors and the management of language anxiety

Language anxiety, which is a distinct complex of self-concepts, beliefs, emotions, and actions related to language learning in class according to Horwitz *et al.*, is one of the most frequently reported factors affecting oral performance in foreign language situations. By means of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Horwitz *et al.* divided language anxiety into three main aspects: communication anxiety, fear of negative criticism, and test anxiety, all of which are closely related to oral production in the classroom.

It is more obvious among Chinese university students that they have greater anxiety in oral situations. Cheng *et al.* found that the Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners had a much higher anxiety level in speaking than in writing, which is consistent with the cultural and curricular factors discussed in Section 2. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a useful theoretical explanation: when the learners' anxiety is high, the affective filter is activated, which prevents language processing and production, even though the learner possesses the required linguistic knowledge. Thus, it is evident that reducing anxiety is not only a psychological problem but also an important condition for effective language learning.

Dörnyei's Second Language (L2) Motivational Self System presents an additional viewpoint which states that the motivation of the learners to improve their oral proficiency is closely related to their identification with an ideal L2 self—a future imagined self who can use the language skillfully and confidently. If the students can imagine themselves as good English speakers, their willingness to participate in the difficult practice needed for fluency improvement is much greater. The teachers can facilitate the development of this ideal L2 self by using visualization exercises, exposing the students to positive examples of Chinese English speakers, and creating classroom conditions where oral risk-taking is explicitly encouraged and mistakes are regarded as indications of communicative involvement rather than lack of ability^[25]. These emotional measures do not substitute for the structural and methodological approaches mentioned before, but they are essential for the effective implementation of these other strategies.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the spoken English fluency difficulties of Chinese university students cannot be adequately understood or addressed by focusing on any single causal factor or pedagogical technique. The problem is structural in nature, rooted in the interaction of cultural values that discourage public oral risk-taking, a curricular system that has historically marginalized speaking in favor of reading and writing, and classroom practices that provide insufficient opportunities for authentic, extended oral interaction. Addressing this problem effectively requires interventions that operate simultaneously across all three of these levels.

Strategies such as Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, corrective feedback design, and affective factor management are advantageous for improving fluency, but these benefits are generally overlooked in the present literature. CLT needs to be suitably changed for large

Chinese classrooms with Confucian educational backgrounds. The effectiveness of TBL relies on the proper organization of tasks, which is hard to accomplish in mixed groups. Corrective feedback should be given at appropriate times and should be intended to improve fluent speaking, instead of the usual practice of many experienced teachers who focus on accuracy. Moreover, although anxiety reduction is significant, it is not sufficient by itself and should be used together with structural and methodological modifications.

The main deficiency pointed out in the present literature is the lack of comprehensive schemes which consider cultural, systematic, and pedagogical factors as interdependent rather than separate variables. Presently, most investigations concentrate on one aspect such as a particular teaching technique, a psychological factor or a curricular regulation, and do not investigate the interaction among these aspects in actuality. Further research will be advantageous to carry out longitudinal classroom studies in Chinese higher educational institutions to observe the long-term impact of multi-level interventions, and to establish cooperation between practitioners and researchers to bridge the gap between theoretical suggestions and the complicated situations of English teaching in Chinese colleges.

For practitioners, the main idea of this review is that it is necessary to make continuous efforts in several aspects to improve the oral fluency of the students, instead of adopting any one teaching method. Those teachers who spend time knowing the cultural reasons for the students' unwillingness to speak, who develop appropriate tasks to reduce anxiety and provide real communication challenges, and who consider feedback as a purposeful teaching decision rather than a spontaneous reaction, are in a better position to effect significant changes. It is also important to create a classroom atmosphere by the teachers: one in which the English spoken is really valued, and mistakes are regarded as a normal part of the learning process. All these conditions correspond to what the Chinese educational policy demands and what the students' future will require as well.

Disclosure statement

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