

# A Study on Strategies for Improving English Application Ability of Chinese College Students

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**Abstract:** With the deepening of exchanges between China and other countries around the world, high English application ability, namely the comprehensive development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills has increasingly become an inevitable requirement for talents by the country and society. This article first analyzes the current situation of Chinese college students' English application ability, and then examines the importance of improving Chinese college students' English application ability. Furthermore, it proposes strategies for improving Chinese college students' English application ability, with the aim of providing some inspiration and assistance for education authorities, university decision-makers, and English teachers in cultivating Chinese college students' English application ability.

**Keywords:** English application ability; China's college English; English improvement strategies; Chinese college students

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## 1. Introduction

With the progressive development of globalization, the country and society are increasingly in need of talents with excellent English application ability, thus improving the English application ability of Chinese college students is becoming increasingly crucial. This article first explores the current situation of Chinese college students' English application ability, then discusses the importance of improving Chinese college students' English application ability, and proposes strategies to improve Chinese college students' English application ability, hoping that these strategies can provide some inspiration to education authorities, university decision-makers, and English teachers, so that they can work together to improve the English application ability of Chinese college students.

## 2. Current situation of English application ability of Chinese college students

The current situation of English application ability of Chinese college students is as follows.

- (1) Good reading and writing skills, poor listening and speaking skills

China has always adopted the traditional English teaching method of cramming due to the influence

of exam-oriented education. This teaching method mainly aims to cultivate students' reading and writing skills. Students using their English knowledge to consult literature and take exams often achieve good results because they have strong reading and writing skills. However, many students are unable to answer teachers' questions and conduct interviews in English when they are required to do so. Moreover, students have concerns and fears when they communicate with foreigners. Students are afraid that they do not understand the foreigners and do not know how to speak English, so they usually tell the foreigners that they do not know English or that their English is very poor. The possible reason for this result is that China's English education does not emphasize the cultivation of listening and speaking skills, or directly neglects the cultivation of students' listening and speaking skills. It is extremely obvious that students' weaknesses are listening and speaking. Most college students in China do not dare to speak English due to shyness and they generally have poor listening skills nowadays <sup>[1]</sup>. Students generally do not have strong oral expression skills <sup>[2]</sup>. College students generally have poor oral communication skills, and they are unwilling to speak English because they are afraid of being laughed at by others <sup>[3]</sup>. The teacher did not allocate enough time for the practice of students' listening and oral expression skills, thus most students could not achieve proficiency in using English <sup>[4]</sup>. In English classes, the teacher mainly teaches the basic knowledge of English. The teacher especially focuses on explaining grammar and vocabulary, while students take notes silently. The traditional teaching method involves teachers explaining words, grammar, sentence patterns, and articles in detail, and students accepting knowledge in a passive way and do not participate in many learning activities <sup>[5]</sup>. Overall, English classes in China mostly concentrate on cultivating students' reading and writing skills, without cultivating their listening and speaking skills. Therefore, the reading and writing skills of Chinese college students are relatively good, while their listening and speaking skills are relatively poor.

#### (2) Small and narrow application range of English

For most of Chinese college students, the main purpose of learning English is to pass various exams and achieve the goal of finding a good job. Apart from applying English knowledge in the classroom and exams, students have almost no other places to use English, which leads to a lack of awareness of the importance of English and its application ability among students, and the belief that English has no other practical application. Mandarin is the official language of China. Both inside and outside the campus are the world of Mandarin, and English is not used on or off campus. Most students can live and work smoothly without using English from primary school to work. For most students, there is almost no application scope for English after graduation. In students' learning and daily life, their normal activities do not involve the application of English, and most students learn English for the sake of exams <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **3. Importance of improving the English application ability of Chinese college students**

English is an international language and the working language of the United Nations, and having a good proficiency of English plays an important role for both individuals and countries <sup>[7]</sup>. A good English proficiency refers to students comprehensively develop their four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, that is, they have good English application ability. The importance of English application ability is self-evident. From a personal perspective, Chinese college students with good English application ability can successfully complete their studies, get a decent job, and perform their duties excellently. More and more job recruiters are using

English application ability as a recruitment indicator. Only by comprehensively developing the four basic skills can students meet the current demand for applied talents in society.

From the national level, Chinese college students having good English application ability is significant for building and protecting the country. Chinese college students are the hope for China's future, and they will enter various fields to work after graduation. If Chinese college students cannot understand or speak the international common language which is English, consequently China can only be looked down upon and bullied by other countries in international exchanges, China's legitimate rights and interests cannot be defended, and economic and national security cannot be guaranteed. At the same time, in the face of the complex and ever-changing international situation, if China wants to win the respect, recognition, and acceptance of other countries, and have a place in the world and international discourse power, it is necessary to use English to promote and protect China. Chinese college students are a powerful force, if they possess a high level of English application ability, they can establish a good international image for China, defend China's legitimate rights and territorial sovereignty, maintain China's image as a responsible major country, and enhance China's influence and competitiveness.

From an international perspective, Chinese college students having good English application ability is essential for maintaining regional and even global peace, development, and stability. As a responsible major country, China is a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a maintainer of the international order. Building world peace, contributing to global development, and maintaining international order all require talents with good English application ability. Specifically, excellent English application talents are indispensable for national diplomacy, international peacekeeping missions, international medical aid, the Belt and Road construction, international trade, international cultural exchanges, etc.

English learning and good English application ability are important for Chinese college students, but many students do not fully recognize the importance of English learning and English application ability. Many students do not have a correct view of English learning and only see it as a process or procedure that requires passing exams in order to successfully obtain relevant certificates upon graduation, without scientifically and reasonably considering the true purpose and long-term planning of English learning<sup>[8]</sup>. There is still a shortage of talents with good English application ability, China needs more college students with excellent English application ability.

#### **4. Strategies for improving English application ability of Chinese college students**

The strategies for improving English application ability of Chinese college students are as follows.

- (1) Emphasizing the cultivation of students' listening and speaking skills, and adding the assessment of listening and speaking in exams

Cultivating students' English application ability is the ultimate goal of college English teaching<sup>[9]</sup>. Many Chinese college students can read and write English, but their listening and speaking skills are relatively weak. Under the influence of exam-oriented education, the current English teaching mainly cultivates students' reading and writing skills to ensure that they can pass different kinds of exams. The final English exam is usually a written exam, and the main assessment content is reading and writing. The final exam of English course mainly assesses students' mastery of vocabulary, grammar, reading, and writing, without involving listening and speaking contents. National English exams such as College English Test Band 4/6 (CET 4/6), Practical English Test for Colleges Band A/B (PRETCO A/B), and Test for English Majors Band 4/8 (TEM 4/8) include the listening section. Each school has different

requirements for the scores of these national exams, and students only need to achieve a certain total score to graduate, with no specific requirements for the grades of each section. Therefore, English listening has not received sufficient attention, teachers rarely cultivate students' listening skills in the classroom, and there is even no listening content in the classroom. The final English exam and national English exams mentioned above do not include assessment of the oral part. Listening section is hardly seen in textbooks and the opportunity to communicate with each other in English is not available for students<sup>[10]</sup>. Only students majoring in English have oral classes and exams, but their oral proficiency is not satisfactory due to insufficient training in oral English. However, English listening and speaking skills are also the fundamental application abilities for students, and schools should focus on cultivating students' English listening and speaking skills. Schools should incorporate the cultivation of listening and speaking skills into cultivation scheme. English teachers should ensure that a certain amount of teaching time is allocated to teaching English listening and speaking, striving to improve students' English listening and speaking skills. Listening and speaking should be particularly incorporated into teaching plans by English teachers, and the proportion of listening and speaking teaching should be specially increased<sup>[11]</sup>.

The form of assessment and evaluation has a guiding effect on the content and methods of teaching and learning<sup>[12]</sup>. The direction and indicator of college English learning is assessment, and a comprehensive assessment and evaluation system mainly based on listening and speaking skills should be actively established by the education and management department<sup>[13]</sup>. The assessment content determines the educational content. If there are assessments for listening and speaking, and certain requirements are made for the grades of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, English teachers will purposefully increase the teaching of listening and speaking during the English teaching process, and students will also strive to learn listening and speaking in their daily studies. 76% of students hoped that the course's assessment was the "written test + oral test", and one of the effective methods to strengthen students' listening and speaking skills training is to increase listening and speaking assessment<sup>[14]</sup>. In future English teaching plans, schools should increase the teaching of listening and speaking, include the assessment of listening and speaking in exams, and make certain requirements for the grades of each part.

## (2) Developing students' cross-cultural communication skills

Students' cross-cultural communication skills are important to their English application ability. To improve students' cross-cultural communication skills and avoid communication failures, teachers can use teaching content that is close to foreign life in class, integrate cultural knowledge of languages of different countries into the classroom, and enable students to learn cross-cultural communication skills while learning English. The cultural background and habits of language should be explained and analyzed by teachers, so that the students' interest in English learning can be stimulated and their practical English application ability can be improved<sup>[15]</sup>.

Lack of cross-cultural communication skills may lead to communication failure or other negative outcomes. Lack of understanding of other cultures and failure to avoid taboo topics in conversations with foreigners may make foreigners feel disrespected or insulted, hence causing misunderstandings. If it happens in the workplace, it may lead to cooperation failure or even worse situations.

## (3) Creating English learning environments for students

The English learning environment is crucial for students to learn English. In China, it can be said that the only English learning environment is the English classroom. However, English classroom is

far from sufficient to cultivate students' English application ability. Students have been exposed to the Chinese language environment for a long time and lack English language environments, making it relatively difficult for them to improve their English application ability <sup>[16]</sup>. As a language, main function of English is communication and exchange. There are very few opportunities for students to speak in English classrooms in China. Students generally use dialects or Chinese in their family, campus, and social interactions, without communication with foreigners or other English environments. In daily life, it is difficult for students to have an opportunity to communicate with foreigners in English. Even if there is a chance to communicate with foreigners, students often miss out on the communication opportunity due to fear of making mistakes or not knowing how to speak English. Therefore, students' listening and speaking are restricted without development. In addition, the teacher's constant emphasis on the importance of grammar makes students even more afraid to speak English. Students are afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, as it may cause criticism from teachers and ridicule from classmates.

There is a lack of English language environment for students to practise and apply English in the Chinese context. However, higher education institutions do have numerous opportunities to provide students with English learning environments. Colleges and universities should be good at utilizing their own resources to provide English language environments for students' English practice and application. There are several types of English learning environments that can be created by the schools. If schools and teachers can fully utilize these resources, it will help to improve students' English listening and speaking skills, thereby achieving comprehensive development of students' English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Conditions and opportunities should be created by schools to encourage students to participate more in international exchanges and academic research, so that the goal of being able to understand and speak English, and communicate with foreigners in English can be achieved <sup>[17]</sup>. To improve students' English application ability, a rich English learning environment should be created by teachers, students should be encouraged to speak English boldly and fully participate in various forms of teaching activities <sup>[18]</sup>. Teachers should create more real-life English practice opportunities to stimulate students' interest and learning motivation, and to establish students' self-awareness and confidence <sup>[19]</sup>.

Visiting foreign institutions is a great opportunity to create English practice environments for Chinese college students. Schools should make full use of this opportunity and encourage more teachers and students to participate in the reception of foreign visitors. Many tasks such as invitations writing, email communication, accommodation arrangements, airport pickup, meeting arrangements, and catering arrangements, etc., require a large number of working personnel. The school can arrange students to participate in these reception tasks. Students can practise their English skills, especially their English listening and speaking, during the reception of foreign visiting groups. At the same time, the school can also arrange lectures and symposiums, allowing as many students as possible to be the participants, so that students have the opportunities to communicate with foreign people in English. Through contact and conversation with members of foreign visiting groups, students can enhance their English listening and speaking skills. The reception of foreign visiting groups is usually serious, tense, and compact. Participating in the reception not only improves students' English application ability, but also helps to cultivate their reception ability, accumulate practical experience, and lay a foundation for students to receive foreign guests in their work in the future.

Visiting foreign institutions is also an opportunity for schools to create English learning environments for students. The members of the delegation should be changed from time to time. At the



same time, schools can consider allowing one or two students to go with the visiting group. There are many benefits for students to follow the visiting group. The first benefit is that students can practise their English and improve their English application ability. The second benefit is that students can broaden their international perspective and gain a firsthand understanding of the cultures and customs of other countries. The third benefit is that students can understand the international cooperation and exchange situation of the school, this enhances students' sense of ownership and their love for their own school. Even if students do not have the opportunity to go with delegation sometimes, allowing different teachers to visit foreign institutions is also beneficial for improving students' English application ability. After returning, teachers can educate and guide students to learn English with their personal experience.

Studying abroad as an exchange student is an excellent opportunity and environment for many students to practise English. The exchange program is conducive to motivate students to work hard in learning English before, during, and after going abroad, and improve their English application ability. Exchange program can create a short-term or long-term English learning environment for students. Chinese colleges and universities should make every effort to promote cooperation with foreign universities, and regularly select 30 students with excellent English application ability to go abroad for exchange twice a year, with 15 students each time. When students go abroad, they need to switch their language mode to communicate with others. In continuous communication, students' oral and listening skills will undergo a qualitative improvement. Moreover, the exchange program itself is an attraction for students. After all, going abroad and studying abroad are many people's dreams. In order to obtain the opportunity to study abroad, students will actively and consciously improve their English application ability in order to stand out in the interview of exchange program.

Foreign teachers are the key figures for schools to create stable English learning environments for students. Colleges and universities can hire foreign teachers to teach English. English courses in college are mostly taught by Chinese English teachers. Schools may recruit foreign teachers to take oral classes for students of English major. Chinese students from other majors have almost no opportunity to have access to foreign teachers. In order to improve students' English application ability, colleges and universities should arrange at least two English classes taught by the foreign teacher for non-English major students per semester. In the English class taught by the foreign teacher, students can personally listen to the pure English pronunciation of the foreign teacher, and can also speak English directly with the foreign teacher, thereby cultivating students' English application ability and confidence in talking with the foreigners. Schools can also invite foreign teachers to participate in large-scale activities on campus, so that students can have more opportunities and environments to communicate and exchange ideas with foreign teachers.

More and more colleges and universities are obtaining the qualifications to recruit international students, and international students can play a significant role in schools creating English learning environments for Chinese students. Schools with international students can create numerous opportunities and environments for Chinese college students to communicate with international students by organizing a series of international cultural exchange activities. English cultural lectures, international food festivals, English song competitions, English corners, English speech competitions, English dubbing competitions, etc. are good international cultural exchange activities and excellent opportunities for students to practise English and improve their English application ability. It is necessary to create environments for students to have the opportunity to practise their language

skills in their extracurricular time <sup>[20]</sup>. Through the activities such as English corners, English Top 10 Singers Competition, and English salons, students' interest in English learning will be developed, their enthusiasm and initiative in learning will be enhanced, the learning atmosphere will be activated, and learning outcomes will be optimized <sup>[21]</sup>. These activities not only provide opportunities for Chinese students to apply English, but also enable international students to integrate into China's living and learning environment. International students can also be invited as assessors to participate in the final English speaking exam, which helps Chinese students to actively prepare for the exam, overcome the nervousness of speaking English to foreigners, and continuously improve their oral and listening skills. The above English learning environments provide students with the opportunities to communicate with foreigners, which are beneficial for enhancing students' English application ability and confidence in talking to foreigners. When students have enough experience of communicating with foreigners, they will no longer be afraid or hesitant when communicating with foreigners or other English speakers in the future, but will boldly and confidently communicate with them.

(4) Reforming the curriculum of college English, providing English courses for specific purpose instead of basic English courses

Chinese college students have already learned and mastered the basic knowledge of English in middle and high schools, but basic English courses are still offered in colleges and universities. Most students may feel that there is no need to take basic English courses again in university. Students might view basic English courses as a burden, and they do not have the interest or motivation to learn the basic English knowledge again. Students think that their English knowledge is enough to pass the exams and qualify for graduation, and they should spend more time on learning the knowledge of their major. Therefore, many students hold their major's textbooks to learn in English class, while English teacher teaches the basic knowledge of English on the platform, which happens a lot. Many vocational school students learn English passively, they only focus on their major courses without interest in learning English, and they believe that it is useless to learn English <sup>[22]</sup>. To increase students' interest in learning English, teachers should teach students some other English knowledge, that is, English for Specific Purpose. English for Specific Purpose refers to the English related to a student's major, which corresponds to the English related to the industry in which the major belongs. Students can learn both major's knowledge and English in the courses of English for Specific Purpose. This course is an effective combination of English teaching and professional English teaching, thus students' professional needs can be met and a large number of versatile professionals can be cultivated for society by learning the course of English for Specific Purpose <sup>[23]</sup>. College students' comprehensive English application ability will be effectively cultivated and improved by learning courses of English for Specific Purpose, because these courses follow the laws of college English language teaching <sup>[24]</sup>.

Colleges and universities should adapt to the times, take the initiative to change, actively reform the curriculum of college English, and offer courses of English for Specific Purpose instead of basic English courses so as to improve students' interest and motivation in learning English and their English application ability, and meet students' professional needs and the needs of society and the country for application-oriented talents.

## 5. Conclusion

Chinese college students have relatively high English reading and writing skills, while their listening and

speaking skills are relatively weak. The overall English application ability of Chinese college students is significant for students, society, and country. China still has a long way to go in improving the English application ability of Chinese college students. However, as long as targeted training is carried out to cultivate students' English listening and speaking skills and cross-cultural communication skills, adequate English learning environments are created for students, and basic English courses is changed into courses of English for Specific Purpose, it is believed that the English application ability of Chinese college students can be gradually improved in the future.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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