

A STUDY OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING CHINESE STUDENTS' SPEAKING ENGLISH LEARNING

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the multifaceted factors influencing students' English speaking learning at a local university in China and to improve students' English speaking ability with suitable methods. The study involved a sample of 200 first-year non-English major students, utilizing correlation analysis to evaluate the predictive impact on students speaking English learning. The research instruments included questionnaires for the factors affecting speaking English and tests on students' English speaking. Data collection was about a 16-week period comparing pretest and post test score, followed by various statistical analyses. The research findings reveal that multiple factors contribute to the students' speaking proficiency, including individual differences, learning environment, and psychological motivation etc. This research not only contributes to the understanding of English speaking learning in the specific context of the local university but also offers insights for similar educational settings.

Keywords: EFL learning factors, English speaking learning, non-English major students

Introduction

Background

English is critically important in the world as it serves as the primary language for global communication (Nunan, 1999), building connections across diverse cultures and countries. It is the dominant language in international business, science, technology, and diplomacy, enabling effective collaboration and the exchange of ideas on a global scale (Crystal, 2003). Proficiency in English is essential for Chinese university students to participate effectively in international business, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges.

In addition, English speaking skills are often considered more critical than other language skills in Chinese universities. so, universities in China increasingly prioritize speaking skills to prepare students for the demands of global interactions.

The condition of speaking English in Chinese universities remains poor. Despite the emphasis on English education, the traditional focus has been largely on reading, writing and grammar, while speaking English is often neglected (Zhang & Head, 2010). Classroom

environments such as teacher-centered teaching methods and large class size limit students to practice speaking. Additionally, many students in Chinese universities lack motivation when it comes to speaking English, partly due to the fear of making mistakes and the cultural emphasis on accuracy over fluency (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis points out that students with high anxiety and shyness struggle to process and retain language input (Krashen, 1982).

Research problems

What are the effects of the factors on students' speaking English ability?

Research Objective

To find and analyze the factors affecting the students' speaking English ability in a local university in Liaoning province.

Scope of the Research

Population Scope

There are 520 fresh students enrolled in the Mechanical College in the local university in Liaoning province. Among them 200 samples selected by means of a simple random sampling technique when the confidence level is 95%, margin of error is 5%, and population proportion is 70%, according to the calculation by Krejcie & Morgan's (1970).

Variable Scope

This study examines various factors influencing Chinese students' ability to speak English which interact to shape students' English-speaking proficiency and development.

The key variables include:

1. Linguistic Factors: accuracy, coherence and flexibility.
2. Psychological motivation Factors: shyness and nervousness
3. Environmental Factors: Classroom environment and teaching method

Time Scope

Learning Stages: Data is collected at the beginning of a new semester.

Duration of Study: Examines students' progress over 16 weeks and to collect the data and analyze the data comprehensively.

Literature Review

There are various factors affecting students' speaking English. Guerra points out how to improve students speaking English with reliable tools (Guerra, 2024). Yingxin indicates that educators utilize the digital classroom to offer EFL students a better educational environment to enhance learning outcomes (Yingxin, 2024).

Psychological Motivation Factors Affecting University Students' Speaking English

Language Acquisition (SLA) theories provide a more holistic perspective on language learning. This section explores how key SLA theories—Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky), the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1983), the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, and the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model—intersect with psychological factors to shape English-speaking proficiency among a local Chinese university students.

Shyness While Speaking English in Front of Others

Zimbardo (2014) describes shyness as a feeling of discomfort or inhibition in social

situations. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that shy students are more likely to stay quiet during group discussions or classroom interactions. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, arguing that language acquisition is mediated through collaboration and scaffolding. According to Vygotsky's theory suggestion, colorful activities like role-playing, small group discussion or using language learning APP to practice speaking English are organized to create a low-stress, supportive environment, which reduces shyness and enhances speaking performance (Swain & Lapkin, 2002).

Nervousness When Speaking English in Front of Others

Nervousness is a common psychological barrier faced by language learners. The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model (Mac Intyre et al., 1998) explains that nervousness and low self-confidence significantly lower students' WTC in English, especially in high-pressure classroom environments. WTC highlights that students should engage in authentic communicative tasks, such as debates, presentations (Dörnyei, 2005). Thus we try to enhance students' WTC by creating a supportive, non-threatening classroom environment (MacIntyre, 2007). Ghafar agrees to simulate conversations, debates, and collaborative problem-solving activities to encourage fluency and accuracy in spoken English (Ghafar, 2023).

Environment Factors Affecting University Students' Speaking English

The environment in which students learn plays a significant role in shaping their ability and motivation to practice their speaking English. According to Brown, a student-centered, communicative classroom fosters better speaking skills (Brown, 2003).

Overcrowded Classrooms

Large and overcrowded classrooms can significantly impact students' ability to practice speaking English. Dörnyei (2005) notes that in larger classes, individual students have fewer opportunities to participate in speaking activities, and teachers are less able to provide personalized feedback or attention. Smaller class sizes allow for more interaction, immediate feedback, and scaffolding, consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the importance of learning through guided interaction (Lantolf, 2000).

Dislike for Teacher-Centered Teaching Method

Many students are dissatisfied with teacher-centered traditional teaching methods, where students tend to remain passive, engaging less in spontaneous speech. This can increase anxiety and reduce opportunities for meaningful oral practice (Wang, 2021). Shifting to a student-centered approach, where Brown (2003) argues that students are encouraged to take the lead in discussions and activities in the learner-centered approaches, which emphasize student participation and interaction, are more effective for language learning, creating a more engaging environment for speaking practice. Korea which has the similar problem provides students with more exposure to spoken English outside formal education (Kang, 2015).

Factors of students' personal English foundation affecting students' speaking English

Students' English-speaking foundations are influenced by various internal factors, which play a crucial role in determining their proficiency and fluency in spoken English.

Poor Pronunciation

One of the primary challenges many students face is poor pronunciation. Pronunciation difficulties can make it hard for students to communicate effectively, even if they have a strong understanding of grammar and vocabulary. According to Pennington (2019), poor pronunciation often leads to misunderstandings in communication, as listeners may struggle to comprehend what is being said. More AI-based pronunciation apps such as fluency in English

and FIF provide instant feedback on speech production and bring greater confidence and accuracy in their speaking English (Couper, 2019).

Lack of Sufficient Vocabulary

A limited vocabulary is a common obstacle for many students when attempting to speak English. According to Nation (2003), vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to all language skills. Students with an insufficient vocabulary will lead to pauses, hesitations, and frustration during conversations. To overcome this challenge, learners need to continuously expand their vocabulary through reading, listening, and active usage in speaking activities.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research. Surveys, interviews, and observations are used to gather insights into the factors affecting Chinese students' English-speaking abilities. A case study or experimental design may also be applied to analyze students' performance.

Research Steps

1. Identifying the Research Problem: Defining key factors influencing English speaking.
2. Reviewing Literature: Examining previous studies on similar topics.
3. Designing Research Tools: Creating questionnaires, interview guides, and observation checklists.
4. Selecting Participants: Choosing students, teachers, and educational institutions.
5. Conducting the Study: Administering surveys, interviews, and classroom observations.
6. Analyzing Data: Evaluating collected information using statistical and thematic analysis.
7. Drawing Conclusions: Interpreting results and providing recommendations.

Data Collection

Data were collected using:

1. Surveys and Questionnaires: Distributed to students and teachers to assess their perspectives.
2. Pre test and post test: Conducted with selected students and educators to attend the tests and collect the data.

Data Analysis

1. Quantitative Analysis: Using statistical tools (SPSS) to analyze survey responses.
2. Comparative Analysis: Using statistical tools (SPSS) to analyze the scores from the pre test and post test.

Research Results

The speaking proficiency is influenced by a combination of several variables, including individual differences, learning environments, and psychological factors etc.

the statistics about the questionnaire

Table 1: questionnaire statistics

Variable		Psychological Motivation Factors(PMF)							Learning Environment Factors(LEF)							Personal Linguistic Differences(PLD)						
		PMF1	PMF2	PMF3	PMF4	PMF5	PMF6	PMF7	LEF1	LEF2	+	LEF4	LEF5	LEF6	LEF7	PLD1	PLD2	PLD3	PLD4	PLD5	PLD6	PLD7
N	Valid	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
Mean		3.52	3.45	3.52	3.41	3.2	3.57	3.49	3.63	3.72	3.75	3.61	3.66	3.74	3.57	3.45	3.52	3.47	3.36	3.34	3.36	3.36
Std. Deviation		1.107	1.136	1.186	1.076	0.96	1.059	1.056	1.009	0.932	1.001	0.986	0.995	1	1.034	1.031	0.951	0.992	1.041	0.948	1.066	1.023
Percentiles		25	3	3	2.25	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
		50	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3
		75	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4.75	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4

The questionnaire includes three variables which focus on students’ psychological motivation factors (PMF), learning environment factors (LEF) and their personal linguistic differences factors (PLD). All variables have 200 valid response. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree. Totally, the data suggests moderate agreement on all factors, with most means around 3.2 to 3.8; Standard deviations indicate moderate variability; meaning responses are not highly dispersed; the percentile values confirm consistency, with 50% of responses clustering around 4.

The comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores

Table 2: comparison of the tests

Category	t-value	df	p-value (Sig.)	Effect Size (Cohen’s d)	95% Confidence Interval (Lower - Upper)
Accuracy	13.041	59	0.001	0.693	1.286 - 2.075
Coherence	10.23	59	0.001	0.681	0.970 - 1.665
Flexibility	5.065	59	0.001	0.51	0.372 - 0.931
Total (Sum)	13.715	59	0.001	1.355	1.361 - 2.174

The researcher selected a large class of 60 students as the experimental group. These students utilized the Fluency in English app to enhance their pronunciation. In addition, the smart classroom was used to implement a student-centered teaching approach, where the 60 students were divided into eight groups to complete tasks such as group discussions, presentations, and role plays. The study spent 16 weeks, during which pre-tests (administered at the beginning) and post-tests (conducted two months later) were used to evaluate students' topic discussion scores. The assessment followed the CET-SET4 standards, which measure three key aspects of language ability: accuracy, coherence, and flexibility, each scored out of 5, with a total possible score of 15. To ensure reliability, three teachers independently rated the students' performance, and the final scores were determined by averaging their evaluations.

The comparative statistical analysis of pre-test and post-test results revealed that the p-values (Sig.) were all 0.001 (< 0.005), indicating that the improvements were statistically significant and not due to chance. Among the measured aspects, total speaking scores (t = 13.715) and accuracy (t = 13.041) showed the most substantial improvements.

As for the Effect size, Accuracy (0.693) and Coherence (0.681) have moderate-to-large

effects while Flexibility (0.510) has a moderate effect. The total score (1.355) has a very large effect, so it means that the overall speaking ability improvement is highly significant. The students improved significantly in accuracy, coherence, flexibility, and total speaking ability after the intervention.

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

A post-test was conducted to the participants of the experimental class. The scores of the P value is 0.01. The analysis results show that the students improved significantly in accuracy, coherence, flexibility, and total speaking ability after the intervention. It shows that analyzing the factors affecting students speaking English and then using suitable digital tools and creating a communicative environment for students is beneficial to improve their speaking English.

Discussion

All the factors that affect the students speaking English are significant for teachers to pay more attention to and all educators need to try the best to solve the relevant problems to improve students speaking English.

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