

# The Survey on Barriers of Oral English Learning for College Students in China

Yuehong Wei<sup>1</sup> & Li Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, China

Correspondence: Yuehong Wei, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Mailbox 213, No. 689 Huadian Road, Baoding 071003, Hebei, China. Tel: 86-358-222-8281. E-mail: lilywei231@gmail.com

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## Abstract

With the development of society, oral English teaching and learning has been the top in English teaching and learning in china. This paper reports a survey conducted at North China Electric Power University on the barriers for learners of oral English learning in china. Questionnaires with both close-ended and open-ended questions were distributed to the students. By means of quantitative and qualitative research methods, this paper analyzes the difficulties the surveyed students have in oral English learning, examines to what degree the obstacles hinder the oral English learning in china and explores effective approach to oral English teaching and learning in conclusion.

**Keywords:** oral English teaching, barriers of oral English learning, oral language competence, College Students, China

## 1. Introduction

Oral English teaching and learning originally comes from the western linguistics. Many researchers put forward oral English learning theories through their own teaching and research experiences in order to improve the oral English teaching and learning. Rebecca Hughes (2005) introduced the methods of teaching, learning and evaluating in oral language learning, meanwhile he also provided some research methods in oral language field. Michael McCarthy (2006) has discussed the oral language teaching and learning or the inner structure of language from the perspective of applied linguistics. However, the study above mainly focused on language itself ignoring the learners, differences of thinking and teaching environment. In Chinese EFL context, these factors must be taken into consideration to improve the oral English teaching and learning, because learners must overcome the negative influence of them. Therefore instructors are supposed to motive students, help them bridge the gap between Chinese and western thinking and utilize the modern teaching technology in oral English teaching in china so as to improve students' oral ability.

## 2. Literature of Oral English in China

Since the 21th century, study on oral English teaching and learning has been popular in China. There are the following aspects about it: 1) The discussion on oral English development theory. Wenzhong Zhang (2000) studied the theoretical model of oral fluency development, making a quantitative and qualitative research in oral English. His other researches mainly covered the methods of developing the oral competence from the aspect of learners. 2) The characters and rules of oral English expression. Qiufang Wen and Jian Hu (2010) made some quantitative and qualitative researches on some aspects, such as voice, syntactic consistency, grammar, vocabulary, discourse markers, stylistic features, and the development of thinking ability. There are some other studies (Anping He, Manfei Xu, 2003; Fengying Mu, Wei Gao, Yunyan Zhang, 2005; Qiufang Wen, 2006) on this subject. 3) Oral English evaluation and test. Professor Qiufang Wen has written two books titled *Oral English Test and Teaching and Learning* (1999) and *Oral English Research and Test* (2004). The two books

mainly introduced the problems and methods in oral English test while putting forward some effective suggestions for oral English teaching and learning. Jigang Cai (2002) did some researches to evaluate the oral English fairly. 4) Oral English teaching and learning methods. Some experts (Lianyi Feng, Lei Wu, 2005; Dongbo Zhang, 2005) discussed the methods and strategies of oral English teaching and learning in terms of the goals, methods, situation and problems. 5) Oral English teaching environment. With the development of oral English internet environment, some experts began to focus on the research of introducing the internet multimedia technology into oral English teaching practice. 6) Discussion on effective factors in oral English study. Oral English learners' characters and effective factors can influence the oral English practice and expression deeply. Researchers made some quantitative and qualitative researches on this subjects from aspects of educational and cognitive psychology (Xiaofeng He, Minmin Yang, 2003; Ming Lu, Wanjiang Ding, 2005).

Above all, we can draw a conclusion that the researches in china have been focusing on the character and rule of oral English expression and evaluating methods in oral English. There are few researches focusing on the obstacles of oral English study in Chinese context. Therefore, this paper is mainly going to investigate the obstacles in oral English learning for college learners in china.

### **3. The Discussion on Oral English Teaching and Learning**

The definition of oral language should come first when we talk about the definition of oral English teaching and learning. Spoken language is the language used in the face-to-face communication among people and is the communicative tool which is mostly frequent used in social interaction.

#### *3.1 The Definition of Oral Language Competence*

Oral language competence consists of oral language skill and ability. The former is the expression of the oral language. The latter influences the former, decides the degree of it and monitors it accordingly. Meanwhile, oral language skill is the necessary process of mastering the language knowledge and cultivating the oral language ability. Actually oral language is divided into active oral speech and passive oral speech. Active oral speech refers to "speaking" which is the process of language outputting and releasing, while passive oral speech refers to "listening" which is the process of language inputting and taking-in. The latter is the base of the former and both of them are closely related. Qiufang Wen (1999) gave another definition of oral language competence from the aspects of language competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence. The oral language competence includes knowing the phonics, tone, grammar, words, rules of spoken language, cultural characters of language and using the proper language forms in the certain situation and non-language forms to overcome some difficulties in the language communication strategically.

#### *3.2 Oral Language Teaching and Learning*

Oral language teaching provides not only the comprehensive input materials and the opportunities for comprehensive output but also a set of communicative strategies. Oral language teaching is the combination of the linguistics and applied linguistics. The teaching process includes language input and output, as well as cultivating strategy. The purpose of college oral English teaching is to help the non-English major students promote the oral communicative competence which also includes the process of transforming and receiving information: input—conduct—output. This is recycle process, that is to say, the teachers' utterance is the input material for students while the students' language output is the input material for the teachers and other students (Lianyi Feng, Lei Wu, 2005).

So college oral English teaching must provide various situation for the students, motivate the mutual communication between teacher and student or among students. Poulisse (1990) defined the communicative strategy as the strategy used by speakers when they confronted some difficulties during their communication because of the lack of language.

In addition, oral English teaching belongs to the field of Second Language Acquisition. In the teaching process, the teachers and learners should take some elements into consideration, such as the differences of between Chinese and Western thinking, intercultural communication and negative transfer of mother language. The language used is the embodiment of thinking to such a great extent. The difference of thinking is likely to cause language misunderstanding and result in the confusion of language rules. What's more, cultural context influences the language communication passively. People from different cultural background have different ways of understanding and expressing on the same topic. In china, the transfer of mother language will result in some difficulties in phonology, meaning and language structure. Above all, oral English teaching should resolve the problems mentioned above. Oral English teaching should cover not only the language teaching but also strategy cultivating, culture acquisition and thinking training.

## 4. Survey of Barriers in Oral English Learning in China

### 4.1 Study Questions

There are the following two questions to be solved in the current study:

- (1) What are the obstacles in oral English learning in china?
- (2) To what extent do these elements affect the oral English learning in Chinese college?
- (3) What are effective approaches to oral English teaching in china?

### 4.2 Participants

The present study was conducted at North China Electric University, China. The 90 participant students are non-English majors studying a college oral English course in their second semester of the first year in the university. They were divided into two classes randomly according to the test having been taken when they enter the university. They are the top students in English reading, writing and listening. Because there is no speaking test in college entrance examination in china, students used to focus on reading and writing. Approximately 70% of the students were male and 30% were female, and their age ranged from 16 to 20.

### 4.3 Instruments

In this study, Questionnaire is the only investigating tool, but in order to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, this questionnaire includes two parts, questions with best choices and open-ended questions. Meanwhile, questions from nine dimensions constitute the whole questionnaire to investigate what the impacts of the oral English learning are in china. Questionnaire on oral English learning was distributed to 90 students. There were 25 items, which were incorporated into five options ranging from: A=strongly agree, B=agree, C=undecided, D=disagree, to E=strongly disagree and one open-ended question related to what the supposed teaching environment is for oral English learning in China. Items focusing on the same topic are not in order in the questionnaire in case of giving the subjective answers. Biographic details including their major, class, gender, and age were asked for.

### 4.4 Data Collection

The questionnaires were distributed to 90 students during the class time without telling them ahead of time. Before they answer the questions, the teacher told the students that the purpose of the study is to help them improve the oral English learning in class and out of class. When the students answered the questionnaire, they were told the choice they made had nothing to do with their final marks of this course and they should give the objective answers. After they finished them, they turned them in. Finally, there were 85 validate questionnaires. There were only 41 items for the qualitative data from 12 aspects (shown in Appendix II) because some students had no idea about the supposed oral English teaching environment. Instructions were given in Chinese in order to ensure that students could understand the requirements.

### 4.5 Data and Results Analysis

#### 4.5.1 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were entered into Excel and examined for the percentage of the students' choices in answering the 25 questions for the percentage of each option can tell what the most influential factor is in oral English learning in china. There are also some figures in bar form showing the results of each dimension in the following and they can tell the reader what specific barriers are in oral English learning. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire were collected to investigate the problems the students encountered in oral English learning environment. The qualitative data also provided some useful insights into how to improve the oral English teaching and learning environment in class and out of class in china.

#### 4.5.2 Result Analysis

From the figure 1, the highest number is the percentage of "A" option in item5. That means most learners rely on their teachers in oral English learning and they can not learn it autonomously. There are more than 60% learners who agree that the barriers of oral English learning are the negative transfer of mother language, difficulties in choosing the proper words and oral English learning environment. The following are the discussion on the nine dimensions.

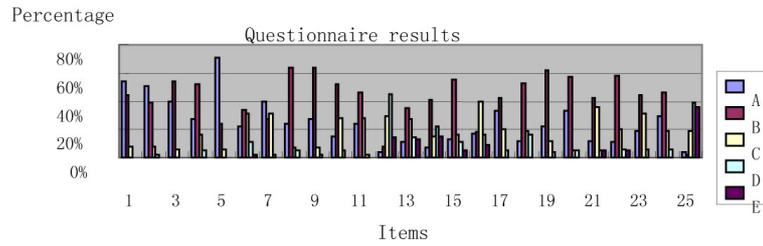


Figure 1.

(1) Figure 2 shows that there are more than 50% learners have the active attitudes to oral English learning. The results of the attitude in the survey show that most learners are interested in oral English learning. In order to help learners in china the following survey has been conducted to investigate the barriers in oral English learning.

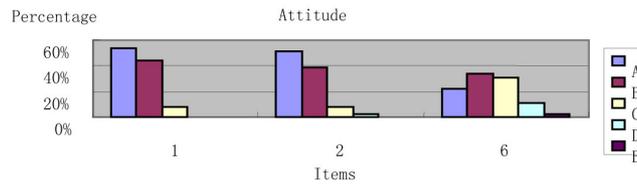


Figure 2.

(2) Figure 3 shows that most learners can not practice oral English autonomously and they can not make their own learning plan but rely on their teachers. One barrier for oral English learning is lack of autonomy.

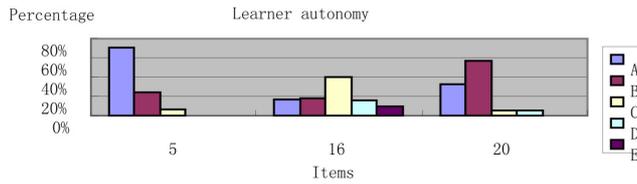


Figure 3.

(3) Figure 4 shows that totally 94% learners agree that the difference of thinking between china and west influence their oral English learning to some extent. 53% learners took the difference of thinking between china and west as the most difficult part in oral English learning. Therefore, the biggest barrier to learners in china is how to overcome the difference of thinking between china and west.

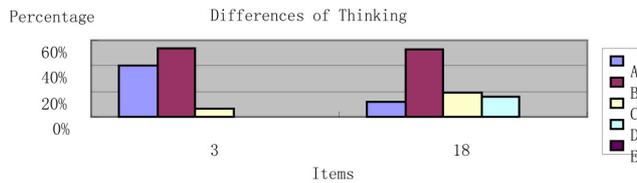


Figure 4.

(4) The figure 5 shows that most students have difficulties in choosing the proper words and always make the same mistakes in choosing words. Vocabulary fossil has been the barriers in oral English learning according to the percentage shown in figure 5.

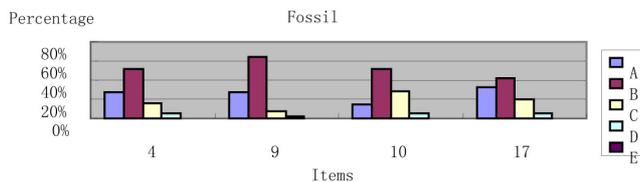


Figure 5.

(5) In figure 6, 88% learners agree that the mother language always influence the oral English and 75% learners agree that they always translate Chinese into English when they speak in English. In this case, the mother language will hinder the oral English learning in china.

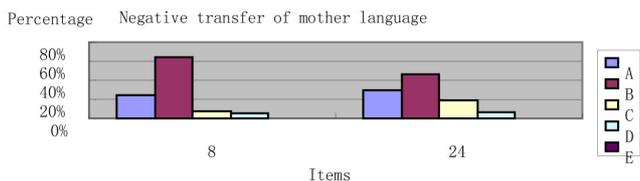


Figure 6.

(6) From figure 7, we can draw conclusion that effective factors play an important role in oral English learning. Because oral form needs communications between people, some learners may be shy or not confident then dare not open their mouth. Learners need the encouragement from the teachers. Effective factors sometimes can also prevent the oral English from being improved.

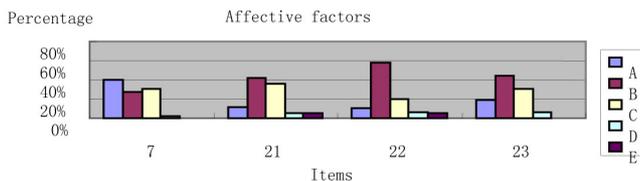


Figure 7.

(7) In the motivation group, items cover several purposes of learning oral English. In figure 8, 68% learners put their interests at the first place. Few agree that the purpose of learning oral English is to go abroad. Less than 50% learners agree that oral English learning can help them find a better job and raise their academic achievements.

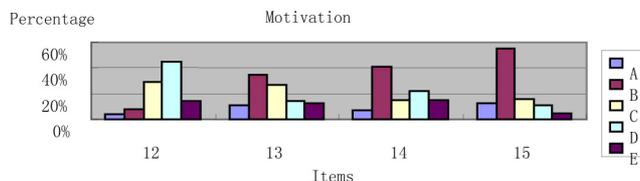


Figure 8.

(8) In figure 9, 75% learners don't agree that culture learning can be neglected. So learners should attach more importance to culture in oral English learning. Intercultural competence can also influence the oral English learning.

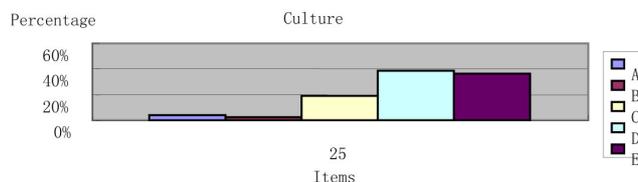


Figure 9.

(9) In figure 10 and appendix II, teaching environment is the key element in oral English learning. Teaching environment mainly includes the teaching devices, teaching methods, multiple media and language atmosphere.

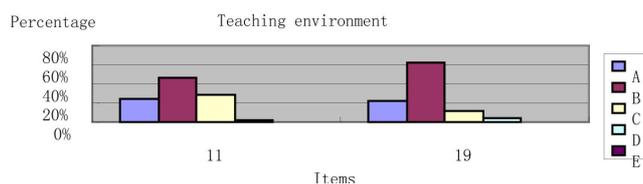


Figure 10.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the results from the survey, there are some barriers in oral English learning in china. Among them, the autonomous ability, negative transfer of mother language, how to choose the proper words and oral English learning environment hinder Chinese college students' oral English learning to great extent. To the contrary, the attitudes to oral English learning are not the barriers in learning process. Instead, they can promote the motivation in the oral English learning. What's more, more than half participants see the differences between Chinese and Western thinking as the biggest barriers in oral English learning. Most of them are proud of their achievements in oral English learning and think that the oral English learning can satisfy their own interests. Therefore, thinking training, encouragement and fairly evaluation are the effective ways to resolve the difficulties in oral English learning.

In order to overcome the barriers, oral English teaching should take the students as the center in teaching process. The teachers should help learners train their English thinking, promote their motivation, resolve the problems that the mother language leads to, speak English flexibly according to certain situation, make good use of teaching resources and environment and follow the teacher's order actively. What's more, learners should avoid the passive attitude and affection in oral English learning, so teachers should motive the learners correctly and make learners be interested in it neglecting the worries. In oral English teaching, teachers should provide adequate sources for students to imitate so as to resolve the phonological and thinking problems. Oral English learning should involve some intercultural communication, so there should be some culture acquisition tasks for learners in oral curriculum in china. Teachers should emphasize the culture acquisition and cultivate the sensitivity of culture and thinking through practice. Meanwhile, vocabulary fossil can be removed after the thinking training. Learners can not rely on vocabulary reciting, especially remembering the Chinese meaning for each word while they should understand the English meaning of each word which can help them improve their English thinking.

There are some shortcomings in the current survey and the results of the current study suggest a number of questions for further research:

- 1) The current survey only covered the small number of students, which may affect the reliability of the result; the development of a larger scale survey investigating oral English learning problems is needed.
- 2) There are only one survey on the barriers of oral English learning and didn't conduct an teaching experiment to overcome the barriers found in the study. Therefore, how teachers can carry out oral language teaching in class within limited class hours is still an obstacle to overcome in China, since most students in Chinese universities only take oral class for once per week?
- 3) English learning in China largely includes five parts which are listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. Since this study only covers one part of them, more comprehensive researches are needed to be done. Researchers can focus on what are specific barriers in other parts of English learning in china.

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## Appendix I

Orgraphic Data about You

Gender: male ( ) female ( )

Chinese name in Pinyin \_\_\_\_\_ Student No. \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Email address \_\_\_\_\_

The following questions are about your oral English learning, choose what you think is the proper answer.

1. Oral English is very important.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

2. I am very interested in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

3. The thinking differences influence oral English learning largely.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

4. Choosing proper words in oral English learning is very difficult.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

5. The oral English achievements mainly rely on teachers.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

6. I want to learn oral English well very much.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

7. My affection always influences my oral English.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

8. My mother language always interferes with oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

9. I can not choose the proper words in expressing meaning in oral English.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

10. I always make the same mistakes in choosing words in oral form and can not correct them easily.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

11. Oral English teachers' teaching methods always affect my oral English performances.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

12. The purpose of improving oral English is to go abroad.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

13. The purpose of improving oral English is to find a good job.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

14. The purpose of improving oral English is to get a high mark in final examination.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

15. The purpose of improving oral English is to meet my own interest.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

16. I can make my own oral English learning plan.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

17. I think the most difficult is how to differ the meaning of words in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

18. I think the most difficult is the thinking difference in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

19. I think the most influential barrier is lack of good oral English teaching environment.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

20. I think the most influential barrier is lack of autonomy in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

21. I am always worried in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

22. Oral English learning make me have a sense of proud.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

23. The communication between teachers and students is very important in oral English learning.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

24. When I come to difficult sentences in oral English, I always think in Chinese first and translate them into English.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

25. I think the most important part in oral English learning is language and we can neglect the culture.

A strongly agree, B agree, C undecided, D disagree, E strongly disagree

26. What are the supposed environments for oral English learning in your opinion?

**Appendix II.** There are some specific answers to item 26 listed in the following.

- (1) Often practice; there should one foreign teacher to teach us;
- (2) Communication among many people;
- (3) You must communicate with others in English;
- (4) Movie watching and chatting in English;
- (5) Input the native language form;
- (6) Relaxing environment.;
- (7) Being involved often;
- (8) English only;
- (9) Being active;
- (10) Topic in oral English class should be related to daily life and interesting.
- (11) There should be some multimedia teaching devices.
- (12) Cultural atmosphere is also needed.