

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS ON NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' ORAL ENGLISH

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THE INFLUENCING FACTORS ON NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' ORAL ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

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Under the Supervision of Ramond Spoto, Ph.D.

As of 2012, “English hot” has been popular for more than 30 years. The traditional teaching mode makes people have the wrong idea of English, i.e. that the most important part of English is vocabulary. Neglecting oral English means students cannot use English to communicate.

When colleges began to offer English majors, speaking ability improved. They have special oral English courses to practice their communicating skills and accent. But how about non-English major students? They still have very little time to use English and nearly no chance to practice oral English.

Of course, students' interest about oral English will affect the final result, but one cannot only focus on students, the teachers and the environment are deeper causes. This research paper concludes some scholarly research on the topic of “the influencing factors of non-English majors” in three aspects: students, teachers, teaching modes and language environment. It will show the relation between factors and oral English level, and get conclusions and some effective solutions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As an important tool of international communication, English plays an irreplaceable role in the study and work of Chinese people. To make sure that college students can have the basic ability of using English, non-English majors (who are the majority of college students) usually need to study English for eight years. In addition, non-English majors should pass the College English Test Band 4(CET-4) before graduating. Though they spent so much time and energy on English, the ability of oral English is still poor. People call this phenomenon as “dumb English”. (Note. In China this is a general term that is not intended to be demeaning.)

This negative phenomenon has attracted people’s attention to oral English. In 2004, the new College English Curriculum Requirements started a new round of the reform of college English teaching. This new objective is to train student ability in the use of English, and to develop listening and speaking skills in particular. This reform stimulates teachers and educators to find out the cause of the non-English majors’ poor oral English and the solutions. Some scholars choose students as their object to analyze student learning motives and strategies, some choose teacher as the object, and the others pay their attention to the environment of the students.

The research paper includes a discussion of the influencing factors of non-

English majors' oral English with internal factors such as the students themselves and external factors such as the teachers' role and teaching methods on the basis of other scholarly research.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed as a question is "What are the influencing factors of non-English majors' oral English?"

Definition of Terms

Dumb English:Is a phenomenon that, after several years of English study, most students can only read articles and write but not speak in English. (Wang Guiping, 2002).

Input Theory: Krashen proposes that humans only use one way to learn a language or accept language materials which are a little higher than their language level. When you teach someone to speak, do not teach them how to speak but give them understandable inputs, their oral English ability will form naturally.(Zhang Qian,2009).

Foreign Language Anxiety: Horwitz and Cope propose that foreign language anxiety is a special phenomenon in language study, and define it as the self-awareness, belief, emotion and activity, which happen in the process of language study. It has something

to do with classroom study and it contains communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in the second language study process. (Lv Hongyan,2010)

Purpose of the Study

There have been some analysis of three factors (student, teacher, teaching method) in non-English majors' oral English learning, but more is still needed to find the answer to the question“Why do non-English majors have such poor oral English? ”

Significance of the Study

Choosing the majority of Chinese students as the analysis object can reflect the present situation of Chinese college English education. Oral English teaching is a significant part of ESL teaching. It is important to find out the influencing factors that will help students to improve their oral English.

Delimitations of the Study

The research was conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host, ERIC, Wilson, Google Scholar and Baidu. Key search terms included “speaking English teaching”, “non-English major”, “oral English”.

Methodology

The research result is based on library-based research, with no data collection process. The content of the review of the literature includes the feature of non-English majors, the problems of non-English majors' oral English, and how scholars try to find out the influencing factors of oral English.

The findings will be summarized in the conclusion part of the research. And recommendations will be made by summarizing other scholars' research. Applications to teaching or other career choices will be explored.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Background of Non-English Majors' Oral English

In the past twenty years, the students' English level in China has been measured mainly by reading ability and writing. With close international communication, Chinese students are asked to have the abilities of listening and speaking. In 2007, the new College English Curriculum Requirements shows that "the goal of college English teaching is to develop abilities in the use of English, especially the abilities of listening and speaking. They can use English to communicate more effectively in study, work and in social contacts in the future. They also can enhance the ability of autonomous study, improve the comprehensive cultural literacy, in order to adapt to the development of our society and the international communication needs". The Ministry of Education has changed the key point to oral English, but it will probably take a long time to change people's ingrained ideas.

The Characteristic of Non-English Majors

When studying non-English majors as a special group, one can find several characteristics. The most prominent one is the imbalance of vocabulary and application level. Every student should pass the College English Test-Band Four (CET-4) before graduating. According to the 2013 Syllabus, students should master the vocabulary of 4000-4400 words. In this level, students should not have any

problems in daily communication, but in fact only a few of them can do it well. Wu Xiaobin (2010) chooses 100 students from 7 non-English majors to find out the level of their oral English. In the study only 78.5% can express their opinions accurately when they are using Chinese as the first language, and only 23.6% can do this when using English as the second language. Another characteristic of this group is that they are not active in the use of English. The American researcher, Rosenwald, who is teaching in the foreign language department of Fudan University, says “Chinese students are introverted and shy. When I ask them questions, they bend their heads and keep silent”. Of course, the character of the east is one of the causes of this phenomenon, but the inferiority complex also cannot be ignored. (Kang Zhifeng & Lu Xiaoyong,1998)

The Influencing Factors of Students

A traditional approach to the studying process has three factors : learner, teacher and teaching method. The learner is the center of the whole process and the characteristics of the learners are the main effect of the result of the teaching process. So researchers pay more attention of students when discussing the influencing factors of students' oral English level, and see students themselves as the internal factors.

One researcher (Yan Qingying,2005) considers motivation as the internal factors in the process of second language learning which cannot be separated. Appropriate

and positive motivation plays a positive role to ensure effective language learning. The learning motivation is the key to improving the effect of students' oral English. Another researcher Brown (1980) divides second language learning motivation into two main types, namely instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. According to Yan's research, most of the non-English majors' motivations are instrumental motivation. That means students often pay attention to pass the test and get the degree certificate but ignore oral English, which is the real communicative function of English. The result is that students will only practice the skills which are used to pass the exam like writing and reading, but never practice speaking skills actively. Negative motivation is one of the influencing factors.

Motivation and attitude are important affecting factors for different learners. As a result, different learners will have different learning achievement. Thus scholars must pay attention to a learner's attitude. An interesting finding from a survey done by Liu Hongmei's (2006) is that 68% of students are interested in spoken English. Such interest provides encouragement, help and support to oral English teaching. At the same time, there must be awareness of the imbalance between interest and activity. From another researcher's survey (Zhu Jufen, 2003), 66.1% of students think oral English ability is the most wanted ability in reading, writing, speaking, translating and listening. But none of them will ask teacher questions in class, and only 13.6% of

them would like to attend group work and role play. Fifty –two percent of them say they read non English readings in their spare time. In summary, it is clear that the students' attitude affects their learning effect directly.

Many scholars think that psychological barriers affect directly on oral English ability. Besides the introverted personality, most of the Chinese students are self-contemptuous. Horwitz points out that foreign language fear is a peculiar phenomenon in language learning. It included the anxiety about foreign language, the self-cognition, beliefs, feelings and the behavior of the learners which are unique and complex. He also had a further point that the second language classroom anxiety, apprehension of communication, test anxiety, test anxiety and negative evaluation of fear (tear of negative evaluation).According to the characters of the embodiment of the anxiety in foreign language learning, Horwitz and Cope concluded that anxiety is more obvious in the process of oral English teaching performance, which is a kind of psychological phenomenon.(Mei Xuefang,2009)

The Influencing Factors of Teachers

Teaching spoken English is the channel that leads to the lake of knowledge flowing to students and the entrance of the channel is the teacher (.Wang Dong & Gao Yonghua,1991) . It is important to have a good English teacher in the teaching process. A good teacher should have developed thinking ability, good cultural

accomplishments, normal psychological quality, the strain of fast reading skills, and can speak standard American English or British English. In fact, we lack these kinds of teachers. The low average quality of English teachers has caused a great impact on oral English teaching

In addition, the importance which oral English teachers attach to teaching directly affects the teaching effect. To emphasize this point Xu Jing (2012) found that only 10% of teachers think oral English is important in listening, reading, speaking and writing. Ninety-five percent of teachers say because of the heavy task of teaching, they do not have enough time and energy to prepare for class fully. At the same time, teachers have to face the exam pass rate, so they have to sacrifice oral teaching time reluctantly and pay the whole attention to examination skill teaching. In this case, the teacher cannot play the role in modeling and student learning enthusiasm declines.

Some teachers have the wrong ideas of testing students' oral English abilities. As the feedback of the whole teaching process, tests can give teachers the direct effect of the teaching result. Therefore a good way of testing is very important. There is no special appointed oral English test in China (Wang Yong & Liu Jin, 2010). In fact, college English teachers often use three ways to test students' English: reading or reciting an article, making a self-introduction and answering questions, and the first one is the most common one because it is the easiest to manage. Of course, these tests

can show teachers the accent and vocabulary levels of students, but reading is not equal to speaking. Reading is an input process but speaking is a combination of both the input and output processes. The wrong idea of oral English will let the students ignore the substance of oral English and separate themselves from daily communication.

The Influencing Factors of Teaching Modes

Besides the factors above, the teaching mode of the teachers also affects the final outcome. An important study was done recently by Wu Yuanhang & Chai Keqing (2009) as an investigation on Non-English Majors. They choose 225 students from five Non-English Majors and find the answers in Table 1.

Table 1

Which Kind of Teaching Mode Does Your Teachers always Use in Spoken English Teaching?

	Listen and Read first and then answer the question	Retell the text	Discussing	Performing
Number	75	85	45	17
Percent	33.8%	38.3%	20.3%	7.7%

It is clear that teachers using traditional teaching modes to let the students answer questions and retell the text. These two modes are easy to operate and the requirement

for teachers is also the lowest. How about the effect? When asked to answer the question: What do you think about the effect of your oral English class? Their answers are in Table 2.

Table 2

What Do You Think about the Effect of Your Oral English Class?

	Very good	good	Common	bad
Number	11	40	60	111
Percent	5%	18%	27%	50%

According students' answers, nearly half of them think the effect is bad. Only 24.2% of them think it is very good or good. Thus we can get a conclusion that the one-way traditional teaching modes are not suitable.

Cooperative learning may be one way to modify the traditional teaching approach. Advocate Quan Huixia (2009) thinks that the cooperative-study mode is a typical two-way teaching mode. It can increase students' enthusiasm and interest. Teachers can provide students with chances to simulate daily communicating by organizing group works and pair works. But in fact this kind of teaching mode is not universally popular because it is demanding for teachers to learn and use the method effectively.

Use of multi-media may be another way to promote the use of oral English.

Advocate Che Chunliu (2011) thinks that one of the most useful ways for improving students' oral English is making full use of multi-media. More than 90% of colleges have multimedia devices, but teachers only use them to show courseware. This is not enough. In Che's research, it was found that English films and songs can provide good students accents, culture knowledge and make classes become more lively. The internet provides a platform for students to study oral English in their spare time. Email, MSN, QQ(a chat software like MSN) make it possible for students to find useful resource, and chat with others in English without face to face. This is more suitable for students who are shy. Using multimedia is the modern demand for teachers, regarding how to find resource for class and how to organize class activities.

Class capacity is important. Scholars such as Zhang Qian (2009), comment on this important element of learning. With the enrollment extension of universities, most English classes become large classes (more than 40 students). Some colleges don't have enough money to provide modern multimedia teaching equipments, so it is hard for teachers to take care of all the students to practice spoken English in the limited classroom time. In class, opportunities are precious. Most of the time, only less than 10 students can get the chance to perform and get the teacher's comment. Other students only can play the role of listening. In Wu &Chai's (2009) survey, there are similar answers.

Table 3

What is the Amount of Your Spoken English Class?

	Less than 20	20-30	30-40	More than 40
Number	0	0	38	184
Percent	0%	0%	17.1%	82.9%

Table 4

How much Time Can You Use for Communication in English Class?

Minutes	Less than 5	5-10	10-20	20-30	More than 30
Number	32	115	44	26	5
Percent	14.4%	51.8%	19.8%	11.7%	2.3%

The overall conclusion is that the traditional “large class” teaching mode creates negative effects on students’ oral English.

Some of the college curriculum is not reasonable. When four hours per week are all reading, writing and translating, the curriculum of oral English teaching is not given proper attention. In many universities, teaching methods mean that students can only have passive acceptance, and they are not really involved in the classroom. The teacher fails to take the student as the center to carry out oral English teaching. Also, the training content does not meet the students' language proficiency, interests and learning needs. Then students lose interest and enthusiasm to practice oral English (Zhang Qian, 2009).

The lack of teaching materials is another factor. Students in different levels should use different suitable books, but the large number of students make it is hard to organize different teaching levels. College English teaching does not include oral English teaching material. Modern American English is the only oral English teaching book for medium-level students, but the book was published in early 80s and it is not suitable today. The other book called "Oral Workshop: Reproduction, Discussion, and Argument" is Ideal but it is boring and not interesting. (Kang &Lu, 1990) in the eyes of most students and teachers interested in the topic.

The Influencing Factors of Language Environment

According to the famous American applied linguist Krashen, and his "Input Hypothesis" theory, only when human get a large amount of comprehensible input can they learn a language. That means the ideal approach to second language acquisition is studying and understanding the target language. With more and more comprehensible language input, the structure becomes complex. At last, learners can express their own ideas with the language of psychological preparation. (He Peifen, 2003) To many students, the English class is the only way to practice English. Non-English majors basically do not take part in the spoken English class and the time of English intensive reading and listening class is extremely limited. Some students do not listen carefully in class and for them, the English input and output is pitiful.

Therefore, limited English time causes the student difficulty in expressing himself in the language and in the psychological preparation (Shi Xiaohua, 2007).

Culture Shock has proved to be a confusing factor for Chinese English students. Culture shock means that, owing to a large amount of differences between British English and American English, especially the differences in pronunciation, students will feel the “shock” of different cultures in many classes. The demonstration of English teaching courseware is British English.; teachers also teach students British English, so that Chinese students may be used to responding to the British pronunciation. For example, the word “dance” will be pronounced as [da:ns] by Chinese students. But when they use English to communicate, they will find that other people always use American English even with the strong accent, “dance”, which pronounced like [dæns]. In spelling, there are also many differences. For example some commonly noted differences are “colour (B)”and “color (A)”. As a result, students are puzzled to know which is correct and they need time to make a connection between the words learned in the class and used for communicating.

Different from the other process, practicing oral English is a process of collective cooperation. Although students are the center of the studying process, they can't achieve the goal only by themselves. In fact, they are affected by the external factors just like partners, time, etc. At the same time, their oral English level is

determined by their teachers. Researchers should see all the influencing factors as a whole, or the result of research will have deviation.

CHAPTER III CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the influencing factors of non-English majors are complex. They involve the students themselves, teachers, teaching modes and the environment that the students are in. These factors cause oral English teaching to become a systematic process, which not only has instructional attribute, but also has social attributes.

According to the scholars' research results, we can see that we still need quite a long time to solve the negative effect that these factors have on teaching results, but the scholars also give other educators some solutions for the future.

For example, Wu Yanping (2006) thinks that teachers should pay close attention to training basic language skills. A famous Chinese professor Xu Guozhang, says that the English language has three aspects, namely the voice, the grammar, and the vocabulary. Speech is the fundamental. No matter if it is listening or speaking, we cannot be lacking in three aspects of language knowledge. Therefore, in order to improve oral English ability, we must first have solid language skills. Teachers should use special time to train students in vocabulary, in accent and in the basic sentence patterns. The students will only have a solid foundation if they have the courage to open their mouths.

One scholar Dongyan(2002) supposes that colleges should offer special oral English classes. In real teaching, English classes use the whole time to let students

read and write. Thus teachers should provide students enough time to get enough input. At the same time, the oral English class should be student-centered. The teachers' roles in class should be that of a controller, assessor, organizer, prompter, participant and resource. Before class, teachers should be planners. They should know the content, the knowledge points and also the students' interest. In class, teachers should be organizers. They should lead the students to do group work and tell them what the goal is to assure the students can take part in class actively.

Students must have self-learning abilities according to Li Changhui (2011). First, teachers should help students to solve problems by themselves and encourage them to prepare lessons before class. In class, students should pay attention to what teachers teach and do their homework carefully. Secondly, teachers should guide students to master good learning skills. For example, they should teach students to memorize vocabulary through the word roots, prefixes and suffixes. Then the teaching effect will rise and so will the students' interest.

Besides the above, teachers, scholars and policy makers still should pay more attention to the reforms of the education system and teaching mode. The backward education mode is the root of all these problems. There is still a long way to go to increase students' oral English.

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