Oral English in China

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ABSTRACT

Many Chinese students begin to learn English as a main subject in primary schools. They focus on the written English while ignore the oral part, because a long-term exploration of traditional teaching makes them believe that test paper score is the ultimate goal. Students have few opportunities to practice their oral English. The situation leads to stagnant, even receded, oral English skills. Therefore, it is a challenge that how to help students to develop their oral English. This paper aims to analyze this situation and put forward some suggestions. The findings reveal that three factors affect oral English: Mother-tongue Interference, Discouraged Atmosphere and Unsatisfying Teacher Qualification. For most Chinese learners, native language will influence their oral English unconsciously in terms of segmental and supra-segmental aspects. Discouraged Atmosphere including the neglect of education system, insufficient education fund and tense relationship between teachers and students are also urgent problems. Furthermore, the average teachers' quality is low, especially in rural areas. For these situations, recommendations are provided in this paper. Firstly, it is important to create a real English environment for learners and it is an effective way to improve learners' oral ability by encouraging them to practice oral expression and imitate native speakers' tone. Secondly, schools should carry out pre-service training programs for teachers and teachers should look for high-quality educational resources online to improve their levels. Thirdly, the teaching system should be reformed, including putting the oral English in the formal examinations to stimulate learners' learning motivation.

Keywords: Oral ability, English learning, Chinese students.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the international status of China has been improved and its relations with other countries have become closer. As the most widely used language in the world, English plays a significant role in international trade and diplomacy, which requires international talents to have high oral English ability [1]. In 2018, approved by the State Language Commission, China's Standards of English Language Ability is officially released by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the State Language Commission [2]. Under the requirements of the new curriculum reform, many cities and universities add or increase the proportion of the oral English test into the college entrance examination [3].

However, although a series of standards for evaluating and grading capabilities are listed based on the China's Standards of English Language Ability, it is not easy to be widely implemented because evaluation criteria are not clear [3]. For example, the fifth level indicates the ability to express opinions or communicate with others on social hot issues, while the sixth level is the one that speakers should be able to discuss with others on social hot topics [3]. Furthermore, "dumb English" is widely spread in China, which refers to the phenomenon that students have learned thousands of words but still can not speak English fluently [4]; some of them do not even have the courage to speak English [5]. This phenomenon frequently happens in developing regions where students' oral English is much weaker than those in the city [2]. Quality of English teachers is not ensured in those regions, but teachers express their desires to receive trainings on how to design effective tasks so as to stimulate students' enthusiasm in learning oral English [6, 7]. In addition, oral English has been despised for a long time in English teaching method, resulting that most students do not know how to use English to communicate with others, even though they had laid a foundation in grammar and knowledge in their heads [1].

Therefore, this paper will discuss the main reasons that affect students' oral pronunciation and consider the improvement of teaching methods to facilitate a necessary environment for students to practice oral English. Suggestions will be provided to further cultivate

teachers' teaching skills and improve teachers' qualifications.

2. MOTHER-TONGUE INTERFERENCE

Learning a new language is prone to be interfered by speakers' mother tongue. Learners unconsciously try to map the new language patterns by using native one. If two languages are homogeneous and share many linguistic features, the transfer is facilitated. But if the two are dissimilar, mechanically applying the knowledge from native language could cause confusion [8]. The distinctive differences between two languages result in many problems in segmental and suprasegmental aspects for Chinese Learners [4, 9]. Segments refer to vowels and consonants in each word while they present rhythm, stress, intonation in pronunciation [9]. To be specific, there is no consonant / ð /, / θ / and / v / in Chinese, which is difficult for Chinese L1 students to pronounce such syllables [9] or they sometimes try to replace them with similar sounds in their mother tongue. For example, in the word "that", Chinese L1 tends to use / s / or / z / instead of English / ð /, use / ai / or / e / instead of English /æ/ [10]. Besides, when there is no stress or different stress in sounds, the same words may have different meanings, even change their classes. For instance, contrast, ferment, and export change their classes, and the meaning of rebel, suspect, and produce has also been changed [9].

3. DISCOURAGED ATMOSPHERE

3.1. Neglect of education system

Not until 2018 did MOE launch China's Standards of English Language Ability [3] as a reference. But there are certain drawbacks in criteria, concerning with evaluator quality and time for widely acceptance and implementation. Nowadays, the common English proficiency tests are National Matriculation English Test (NMET), Graduate School Entrance English Exam (GSEEE), College English Test (CET) and Test for English Majors (TEM). According to these four tests, NMET and GSEEE represent the equivalent of the university, while others mean the examination for obtaining a degree and TEM aims at English major. However, none of them have mandatory requirement for oral competence [11]. Most often people pay attention to the teaching and explanation of English basic language, grammar, and sentence knowledge in English teaching, but ignoring the cultivation of students' oral ability [1].

3.2. Lack of Education Fund

According to Peng's [12] findings, the main reasons why China, especially rural areas, still develops in a slow progress are insufficient teachers, poor medical insurance of teachers and limited career development budget. A significant gap **in** the allocation of funds exists between different regions, urban and rural schools, may lead differences in student experience, shortage of professional teachers and lack of opportunities for high-quality professional development [12]. Schools with inadequate budgets can do nothing but merely maintain daily teaching work, and only a small amount of funds can be invested in teaching facilities, such as the lack of multimedia and voice practice rooms. And these teaching facilities will affect the language teaching [2]. Teachers and students are primary participants in class, so the unsatisfactory oral English ability which results from the lack of equipment for practice and teachers' teaching level can not reach the needs of the development of the times [2].

3.3. Tense relationship between teachers and students

Varga [13] demonstrates that when teachers establish positive contact with students, a positive learning atmosphere will be formed and students' performance will be improved. On the contrary, if there is not a good teacher-student relationship, there will be a negative impact on students. When students feel that the teacher does not care about them, they may feel depressed in class, and find excuses to delay when handing in their homework or even play truant [13]. Based on Varga's [13] study, Li [1] also proposes that a harmonious atmosphere can help to mobilize students' emotional internal factors. It is hard to inspire students' enthusiasm without a close relationship between teachers and students. Under the influence of traditional teaching in China students are more in a passive state in learning, which cause them to develop a psychological dependence on teachers, so their self-learning abilities can not be effectively developed [1].

4. UNSATISFYING TEACHER QUALIFICATION

In Chen and Goh's [14] interview, most English teachers says that they could not organize efficient oral activities to stimulate students' participation and they do not have enough time to cover the deficiencies. As non-native speakers of English, a number of teachers think that their quality is insufficient and worry about their low self-efficacy. Moreover, a number of middle school English teachers can not flexibly apply what they have learned to teaching and can not communicate with their peers or foreigners in daily life; some of them can not even express themselves in primary English accurately, including either phonetic errors or improper use of words [15].

These are primarily because oral English is not included in the national examination, which will produce indifferent emotions in the hearts of teachers and students. The flow means a vicious cycle: due to poor conditions, English graduates are reluctant to teach in rural schools,

resulting in a relatively small number of English teachers. Then rural areas have to lower recruitment standards, teachers who are not English majors can also teach English. Some teachers have poor professional oral ability, including pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. All these have unconsciously affected the students' pronunciation and intonation. [2].

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH

It is better for English learners to study in a real English environment, since what they get from books is abstract knowledge. In other words, teachers should help students to convey their meanings through dialogue. Communicating in a way that can be understood in the real communication situation will facilitate the students to use English [16].

Firstly, a simulated English-speaking environment should be created. Thus, learners can join together to learn and speak English. Culbertson [17] argues that people perceive the language implications through the real word instead of abstract text. Through the educational activities related to second language learning, such as 3D game. In a 3D game, players can cooperate to find words in the game environment to complete the task. It utilizes the game mechanism to stimulate players' learning. Players must complete all tasks at the present game level before they can go to the next level. This is conducive to learning English, improving the clarity of oral expression and speakers' confidence [17]. Watching movies is another good illustration of this point, because movies can create a good English learning environment that students need [16]. While watching English movies, students can hear real language in a real English environment. Chinese learners can improve their listening and speaking abilities, expand their vocabulary, and even improve their pronunciation and intonation.

At the same time, students may have the feeling of being on the scene, and this can encourage them to repeat the movie lines and imitate the tone. English movies can be used for language input by watching the movie plot to read subtitles. The real scene will help students to learn the language in the natural communication environment, and use the corresponding English language to make students understand more deeply, and then use what they learn in English movies (such as words, sentences, proverbs, etc.) for language communication [16]. In addition, the real scenes and rich stories in English movies can fully stimulate students' interest in actively capturing and understanding language information, and then encourage them to preserve sufficient confidence to listen, see and understand, and finally stimulate their desire and interest in learning [16]. In fact, this is the process of language acquisition. It is useful for teachers to provide vivid images according to English movies, which can help to cultivate students' oral English

pronunciation [16]. After watching some movies, teachers can encourage students to recognize speech errors and put the exercises in interesting poems, music, or videos to make pronunciation teaching meaningful and impressive [18].

Secondly, in terms of teachers' ability, it is necessary for them to carry out pre-service training, such as knowledge about English language learning and philosophy and methodology of language teaching [7]. Yu [2] suggests that education administrators should invite stunt teachers to hold professional training lectures in schools, which can help to improve teachers' English professional knowledge and oral English expression. Moreover, Chen and Goh [7] demonstrates that these training should not only provide teachers with language skills and teaching knowledge in grammar, reading and writing, but also focus on listening and speaking, so that teachers can form strong self-confidence and better develop their English ability in all-round efforts to help students. In addition, teachers can also try to find high-quality educational resources through the Internet to improve their comprehensive ability [2].

As for teaching plan and teaching content, at present, the teaching content in English of middle and high schools is not satisfactory, thus it needs further reform [15]. Lacking of resources is considered to be an obstacle to oral English teaching. Many teachers are dissatisfied with textbooks that they think are outdated and useless for classroom teaching [7]. In order to provide students with an all-round audio-visual learning platform of picture, text, sound and image, schools should add corresponding audio tapes to the topics of "pairwork", "grammar focus" and "language study" in high school English textbooks, and expand their multimedia demonstration exercises appropriately [15]. Furthermore, the conversation content of each unit in the textbook should be appropriately increased, especially the content closer to and more interesting to daily life [15]. What is more, teachers should consciously combine learning methods with the purpose of communication, guide students to comment, express their own opinions, and try to summarize by themselves. This way can help to achieve excellent teaching effect, and students can possess a solid grasp of oral knowledge [1]. In addition, teachers should avoid the traditional teaching method such as questioning. On the contrary, they can arrange courses through games, which is a relatively relaxed environment for students in that they may not feel nervous or stressed when being ridiculed or making mistakes. Teachers can also encourage students to speak English more loudly and correctly during the process of games [5].

Furthermore, it is urgent to reform the teaching system because oral English ability is the need of the development of the new situation in the world [15]. The state needs to allocate sufficient teaching time for oral English teaching. More resources can also be invested in

teaching facilities, such as audio and video labs, multimedia devices and personal electronic devices that make learning portable [7]. Perhaps if oral English is included in the formal examination, teachers and students will attach more importance to oral English than before, and their oral English level will be improved a lot. Also, the state should take effective measures to speed up the formulation of regulations and plans for students' oral English examination, and vigorously publicize the importance and necessity of the examination through the media, to enhance the motivation of teachers and students for oral English teaching and learning [15].

Finally, it is better for teacher to pay more attention to students because teaching is a common process between students and teachers. Students should find more opportunities to practice oral English. In order to help them improve their listening, speaking and overall communication skills, teachers should lead students to realize their leading role in the classroom, and make sure that all conversations between teachers and students in class are spoken in English as much as possible. [5]. According to Varga [13], if teachers have high expectations for all students, it can help students feel a sense of belonging to the class. No matter what teachers' attitudes towards students is, teachers are responsible for inclusive education. Friendly teacher-student relationship and learning atmosphere will also improve students' participation in the class [13].

6. CONCLUSION

This essay mainly introduces some problems related to oral English in Chinese English class, and then puts forward some suggestions for teachers and English learners in order to help and guide them improve their oral English, making students realize the importance of oral English and improve the overall level of their spoken English.

In the future, learners are expected to spend some time on practicing oral English and communicate more in class. In addition, teachers need to improve their level of oral English, organize some activities to encourage learners to speak English, such as role-play games and play some English songs or videos before teaching, which can not only stimulate learners' interest, but also create an English atmosphere in class.

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