

# Aligning China's National English Speaking Standards to Speaking Activities in Oxford Shanghai Junior High School English Textbooks: Problems and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

The globalized world with the fast advancing of science and technology has required more global talents with proficient English communication skills. China as the largest developing country with the 1/4 of the world population also emphasizes the importance of English proficiency, specifically English communication skills, in its education system from K-12 to higher education in order to meet the challenges and requirements brought by the globalization. Textbook is the carrier of the curriculum. However, the textbooks in China have many existing versions and many of them were considered as not being able to meet the requirements of the National English Speaking Standards. Thus, this paper aims to analyse the speaking-related activities/contents in the English textbook used in Guangdong middle schools in order to develop a better understanding of the problems of educating future generations on their English communication skills to meet the global challenges.

**Keywords:** *English Speaking Standards, English Textbooks, English Communication, English Proficiency.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The globalized world with the fast advancing of science and technology has required more global talents with proficient English communication skills. China as the largest developing country with the 1/4 of the world population also emphasizes the importance of English proficiency, specifically English communication skills, in its education system from K-12 to higher education in order to meet the challenges and requirements brought by the globalization. For example, the National English Standards has required students be able to: (1) provide information on simple topics, express simple views and opinions, and participate in discussions; (2) communicate information with others and cooperate to complete tasks; and (3) make situational dialogues according to the topic and so on. However, the implementations of such Speaking standards have met some challenges. For instance, teachers' resources are not enough. There are many teachers fail to create efficient and high-quality spoken English classes for students. Moreover, the scarce of spoken English teaching activities and low utilization of spoken English teaching resources are also the main challenges [1]. Textbook is the carrier of the curriculum. However, the

textbooks in China have many existing versions and many of them were considered as not being able to meet the requirements of the National English Speaking Standards. Thus, this paper aims to analyze the speaking-related activities/contents in the English textbook used in Guangdong middle schools in order to develop a better understanding of the problems of educating future generations on their English communication skills to meet the global challenges.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly articles on analysing the contents/activities in the middle school English textbooks in Guangdong mainly focused on the following three areas: (1) Vocabulary; (2) Grammar; and (3) Reading Instructions.

### 2.1 Vocabulary

Most studies on analysing the contents of the English textbooks focused on the vocabulary instructions. Most studies on analysing the contents of the English textbooks focused on the vocabulary instructions. For example, Qin [2] investigated the relationships of vocabulary frequencies demonstrated in

the textbooks and students' vocabulary acquisition and she found positive relationships between them. This result means that vocabulary acquisition is affected by the occurrence frequency of words. In Qin's [2] study, the subjects demonstrated better acquisition for high-frequency words, but worse acquisition for medium and low frequency words. At the same time, Qin [2] also found out that the frequency of word occurrence is not the only factor determining the acquisition rate. Words with high frequency of word occurrence can have low acquisition rate, while words with low frequency can also have high acquisition rate. The relationship between frequency of word occurrence and vocabulary acquisition is not absolute: on the one hand, frequency of word occurrence has a significant effect on vocabulary acquisition; On the other hand, the effect of word frequency on vocabulary acquisition is limited.

Yao [3] analysed three editions of English textbooks for junior high schools (Go for it! Oxford English Shanghai Edition, and New Century English). She studied the total amount of vocabulary, the amount of each part of speech, and word frequency. She found that these three editions of textbooks mentioned above do not have ample vocabulary. Yao suggested that more vocabulary should be provided in the English textbooks for students to meet with their communicative needs.

Yan [4] suggested some teaching methods of vocabulary in the Oxford English textbook for junior middle school: firstly, to introduce new words by practicing old words; secondly, to make full use of multimedia technology in vocabulary teaching; thirdly, to create context; and lastly, to develop associations.

## **2.2 Grammar**

Some studies on analyzing the contents of the English textbooks were found to focus on the grammar instructions. For example, Zhao [5] studied the application of situational teaching method in English grammar teaching in junior high school. He found that the traditional English grammar teaching model has been unable to adapt to the development trend of English teaching in the new era. Therefore, teachers should actively innovate English grammar teaching, improve the interests of English grammar teaching in junior middle school by adopting situational teaching method, improve the efficiency of English teaching, and bring better English learning effects to students.

Zhu [6] analyzed the grammar section of the Oxford Textbooks (Shanghai Edition) for Junior High School based on Larsen Freeman's Three-Dimensional Grammar Theory. She studied the inconsistency between actual grammar teaching content and textbook content. Similarly, Xie [7] studied the teaching status and solutions of English grammar section in Oxford Junior High School, and studied how to improve

students' interests in learning grammar and enhance the effectiveness of grammar teaching by taking a provincial open class he taught as an example.

## **2.3 Reading Instructions**

There are a lot of studies on analyzing the teaching methods of the English textbooks focused on the reading instructions. For example, Zhao [8] sorted out the different purposes of pictures within the reading sections in textbook in junior high school, aiming to further improve classroom teaching efficiency and improve students' reading comprehension. Hu [9] studied the application of pre-reading task in junior high school English textbooks and its effects on English reading processes and achievements.

Taking junior high school students as the research subjects, Zhuang [10] explored the use of metacognitive strategies on students reading and the influence of teachers' use of metacognitive strategies on students. She provided empirical evidence on the use of metacognitive strategies in junior high school students reading, and put forward some intentional suggestions on English reading instructions in junior high school and teachers' use of metacognitive strategies.

## **3. METHODS**

This study applied content analysis method to analyze the speaking content/activities in middle school English textbooks used in Guangdong Province, which is Oxford Shanghai Junior High School English textbooks. They are co-adapted by Shanghai Curriculum Textbook Reform Committee for Primary and Secondary Schools and Oxford University Press (China) Co., LTD. Their theme is student-centered, and they adopt modular writing system and task-based teaching method in language learning. There are a total of six books for grades 7, 8 and 9, two for each grade level. The textbooks are widely used in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shenyang and other regions in China. In order to understand the textbooks better, the National English Standards, specifically its standards related to speaking, were also analyzed.

## **4. FIGURES AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **4.1 Analyzing the National English Speaking Standards**

The National English Standards require students to achieve level 3 at the end of Grade 7, level 4 at the end of Grade 8, and level 5 at the end of Grade 9. I first analyzed the overall goals for each grade level from Grade 7 to 9 (see Table 1). Then, the speaking components revealed in the overall goals were specifically located and analyzed for the purpose of this

study (See Table 2). The specific goals for Speaking in each level were also analyzed to better understand the detailed standards China has placed in its future generation who are studying in middle schools (see Table 3).

Level 3 of Speaking related standards starts with requiring students to be able to exchange information with simple words and sentences with teacher instructions. Communication is not a focus at Grade 7 at this point. Instead, students are required to practice their pronunciations and tones of words.

Level 4 of speaking related standards started to require students to be able to express ideas in simple sentences, describe their personal experiences, and communicate in a few conversational turns. Communication skills started to be a focus in Grade 8 but not in real scenarios but in role plays.

Level 5 of speaking related standard started to require students to be able to participate in conversation and cooperation, state their opinions, and provide appropriate information asking for help.

**Table 1** Overall Goals from Level 3 to Level 5

Level 3	Students can demonstrate enthusiasm and initial confidence in English learning. Can understand passages and short stories on familiar topics. To exchange information with teachers or classmates on familiar topics, such as their school and family lives. Can read short stories and other simple written materials, and write simple sentences with examples or pictures. Can be able to participate in simple role-playing activities. Can try to use appropriate learning methods to overcome difficulties in learning. Can be aware of cultural differences in language communication.
Level 4	To have clear learning needs and goals, strong confidence in English learning, able to understand dialogues and short stories in daily communication situations. Exchange information and simple advice on familiar life topics. Students can read short stories. Can write notes and simple letters. Can experiment with different educational resources, extract information from oral and written materials, expand knowledge, solve simple problems and describe results. Can learn from each other in the study, help overcome difficulties. Can

	reasonably plan and arrange learning tasks, and actively explore appropriate learning methods. To pay attention to the cultural differences between China and foreign countries in study and daily communication.
Level 5	To have a clear motivation to learn English and a positive learning attitude. Students can identify with various topics in China, exchange information and express opinions with others. Be able to read simple reading materials, newspapers and magazines for grade 7 to 9. Can overcome the barrier of vocabulary and understand the general idea. To have the ability of using appropriate reading strategies for reading purposes and to drafting and revising essays according to prompts. To have the ability of working with others to solve problems and reporting results, completing learning tasks together. To be able to evaluate and summarize your own learning methods. To have ability to utilize multiple educational resources to build learning. To further enhance the understanding and recognition of cultural differences.

**Table 2** Contents related to Speaking in Overall Goals

Level 3 standard	speaking exchange information
Level 4 standard	speaking exchange information and simple ideas
Level 5 standard	speaking exchange information and state opinions

**Table 3** Speaking Standards from Level 3 to 5

Level 3 Language skills target	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students can communicate with short English in classroom activities;</li> <li>2. Students will be familiar with the topic of simple communication;</li> <li>3. Can under the guidance of teachers to participate in a simple role-playing games and activities;</li> <li>4. To use the tips given, such as pictures, slides, object, text, such as simple to describe one thing;</li> </ol>
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- 5. To provide information about individual situation and personal experience;
  - 6. Can be simple little story.;
  - 7. To recite a certain number of English poems or ballads and sing some English songs;
  - 8. Can be basically correct pronunciation and intonation in the above oral activities.
- Level 4 Language skills target
- 1. Students can give coherent simple instructions according to the prompts;
  - 2. To introduce the topic and have several rounds of conversation;
    - 1. To describe their own or others' experience in simple language according to the pictures with the help of teachers;
    - 2. To participate in role-playing activities under the guidance of teachers;
    - 3. To use correct pronunciation and intonation in the above-mentioned oral activities.
- Level 5 Language skills target
- 1. Students can provide information to express simple views and opinions in the discussion of simple topics;
  - 2. Can communicate with others in information, to complete the task of cooperation;
  - 3. To do self-correct properly in oral communication, effective inquiry information and ask for help;
  - 4. Can make situational dialogues according to the topic;
  - 5. To show phrase in English;
  - 6. Can in pronunciation and intonation in oral English activities naturally, tone properly.
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#### **4.2 Speaking Activities in the English Textbook**

The Speaking activities in The Oxford Shanghai Junior High School English textbooks used by Guangdong Province were analyzed to reveal its hidden focus. The speaking section in the textbooks in Grade 7, Grade 8, and Grade 9 has similar structures, which includes 2 activities: Talk Time and Speak Up.

##### **4.2.1 Grade 7 Speaking Section**

Grade 7 Speaking Section in each unit includes 2 activities:

**Talk Time:** Talk Time at grade 7 level usually includes activities for students to practice letter recognition and letter pronunciation. For example, in one of sections, students are required to recognize phonetic symbols /r/ and master the correct pronunciation, and practice pronunciation in words and sentences.

**Speak up:** In this section, students are usually required to answer questions or make simple situational dialogues based on the information given or conduct group discussion to the topic.

The analysis of the speaking activities in Grade 7, specially activities in Talk Time, generally focused on letter recognition and letter pronunciation. Speak Up activities usually focus on asking children practices simple conversations within small groups with scripted information. In some cases, some speaking activities provided sets of words, sentence frames, and set contexts for students to talk.

##### **4.2.2 Grade 8 Speaking Section**

Grade 8 speaking section in each unit includes 2 activities:

**Talk time:** Talk Time at grade 8 level usually includes activities for students to practice tones and stress in words and sentences. For example, students are required to add rhythms to words and sentences when they speak.

**Speak up:** In this section in grade 8, students are usually required to do role plays in groups. For example, students are asked to take up the roles as captain or sailors and conducted a conversation between these two roles.

The speaking activities in Grade 8, specifically activities in Talk Time, generally focused on practicing stress and tone in sentences. Speak Up activities often ask students to practice sentences in role-plays with complete scripts within small groups. In some cases, some activities ask students to describe their personal experiences or to describe their responses to a set scenario.

##### **4.2.3 Grade 9 Speaking Section**

Grade 9 speaking section in each unit include 2 activities:

**Talk Time:** Talk time at grade 9 level usually includes practices of conversation in real contexts. For example, one activity requires students to practice talking in the scenario of leaving messages and taking

phones. However, sentence intonation is also emphasized.

**Speak up:** In this section in Grade 9, students are required to have spoken English group discussions in various contexts or topics and learn to use some practical words or sentences. For example, one activity asks students to talk about favorite sports in pairs.

The speaking activities in Grade 9, specifically activities in Talk Time, generally focus on practicing complete, scripted sentences in particular themes and scenarios. Speak up activities usually ask students to discuss issues (e.g., eating routine, your favorite animal) within different small groups in conversations. Sentence frames and sentence structures were not often consistently provided to guide students' speaking activities.

### ***4.3 Aligning Speaking Standards and Speaking Activities in the English Textbook***

For the purpose of this study, I specifically examined how the Speaking activities were designed and how they aligned with the requirements of the Speaking Standards. The data analysis demonstrated that the Speaking (1) Standards placed higher demands on students' speaking skills than what the Speaking activities in textbook targeted. For example, in Grade 7, the Speaking Standard requires students to be able exchange simple information. However, the speaking activities in Grade 7 textbook often provided complete, scripted sentences for students to practice, which are not able to align with what the standards require; (2) the speaking activities in textbooks, though demonstrate varieties, are not able to cover all speaking skills required by the standards. For example, the Level 3 overall target language skills in Grade 7 required students be able to recite certain number of songs and nursery rhymes. However, there is only one single activity in the Grade 7 textbook is loosely related to this target.

## **5. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH SPEAKING ACTIVITIES**

Firstly, part A and part B in Speaking units are not closely related. Usually, in Grade 7, part A is about practicing phonetic pronunciation and part B is about practicing conversations using the contents taught in the whole unit. However, the words selected in part A are usually not related to part B. Usually, in a well-designed textbook, the components of each activity should be closely connected so that students can be exposed to the same words/phenetic sounds in multiple ways.

Secondly, real communication is missing in the speaking tasks design. Many of the speaking tasks are scripted and students only need to read from examples

(e.g., sentences, words) provided and there is no real communication required from students. For instance, in the Grade 8 textbook, one of the tasks is to listen to the conversation below and pay attention to the pronunciation of the words highlighted in blue, then practice them in pairs. This task mainly focuses on listening comprehension rather than speaking, which are not able to enhance students' communication skills. This type of problems in Speaking activities design in textbooks is well-recognized by scholars in China. They generally considered it a big challenge that are not easy to solve in the near future. Specifically, scholars in China recognized the fact that the English teacher force in China overall do not have the appropriate English Speaking proficiency to support the implementation of appropriate Speaking activities for the purpose of developing students' communication skills. The reasons behind the lack of English Speaking Proficiency is highly complex and out of the scope of this paper. Due to the limited proficiency among China English teachers, it is understandable from this perspective that the Speaking activities design in China's English textbooks focused mostly on listening skills and listening comprehensions rather than real communication skills. However, the younger generation of English teacher force is most likely to equipped with better English speaking proficiency. Thus, the English activities need to adapt to the new changes in teacher force and more activities that can actually enhance students' communication skills need to be included in the English textbook as soon as the teacher force can catch up with the demands of the textbooks and curriculum.

Thirdly, there are a few activities was out of context that the students are familiar with. For example, in the Grade 8 textbook, there is an activity that provides an imaged context that two people are complaining and arguing how their pets have disturbing behaviors. In this activity, students are required to take turns to make and respond to each other's complaints in pairs in related to this imaged context. In China, there are not as many families as in other countries that actually have a pet so students may not be familiar with the content needed to be able to complete the activity.

Fourthly, the designs of the speaking activities are not consistent. For example, sometimes, the same type of activity provided words and scripted sentences for students to structure their conversations. However, the same type of activity in another unit did not provide words and scripted sentences, which are not only inconsistent but also increase the level of difficulties for students.

Finally, the curriculum activities design is not closely related to the level 3, 4 and 5 goals of some spoken English language skills. For instance, there is only one activity about poetry in Grade 7 in speaking

tasks, while the goal of Grade 3 is to be able to recite a certain number of English poems or ballads and sing some English songs.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study analysed the speaking activities in the English textbook used in Guangdong middle schools and aligned them with the English Speaking standards for Grade 7 to Grade 9 in middle school in China, in order to develop a better understanding of the problems of educating future generations on their English communication skills to meet the global challenges.

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