



# Three Representative Teaching Methods of Oral English in Chinese Primary Schools

Qianying Li<sup>(✉)</sup>

Department of Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada  
nancyli4@cmail.carleton.ca

**Abstract.** “Dumb English” is a widespread phenomenon in China. It illustrates that it is difficult for students to communicate naturally and fluently in English after studying English for many years. The reason is that students lack of oral English training. Moreover, there are different problems affect Chinese students’ English-speaking. The most important problem is that traditional teaching modes neglect to cultivate students’ oral English competence. Furthermore, the age has significant influence on acquiring a language. Hence, schools cultivate students’ oral English ability as early as possible can help students to lay a steady capacity of English communication. Therefore, this paper illustrates representative teaching methods for cultivating pupils’ oral English through concrete situational teaching method. Game teaching method stimulates students’ interests in English-speaking. Movie teaching method effectively enhances students’ competence of spoken English. Role-playing teaching method is the most common and popular approach in situational teaching. Finally, this paper mentions three general oral English errors and error correction methods that need to be noticed by teachers and students.

**Keywords:** Dumb English · oral English · situational language teaching · game teaching method · movie teaching method · role-playing teaching method · error correction

## 1 Introduction

In the diverse and rapidly developing world, English is widely spread in different countries. As a universal and international language, English is an indispensable communicative media in the world. Therefore, English learning is necessary in people’s everyday life, especially for young students. In China, schools generally begin to offer English courses in Grade 3 at primary schools. However, the focus of English class is cultivating students’ exam ability because English is included in the high school entrance examination and the college entrance examination. Because of this, students’ purpose of studying English gradually becomes to pass examinations. Thus, they ignore the practical English skills such as English-speaking. Consequently, although students start learning English from the early year of primary schools, they cannot speak English fluently because their lack of oral English training. This phenomenon is referred to as “dumb English”, and it can be found in many regions in China [1].

There are many factors contributing to this horrible situation: 1) students do not have the language learning environment and most of them feel anxious about English-speaking [2]. In class, teachers teach English to students in Chinese in order to make students understand what they are teaching. Absolutely, students must use Chinese to answer questions and interact with teachers. 2) “uselessness” is also a serious problem because there is no chance for students to deal with English except in class. They have no English conversations, and they have no access to English in daily life. As a result, students are still in a Chinese-speaking environment to study English. 3) students are afraid to speak English due to lots of “fear” reasons such as “fear of making mistakes and being laughed”, “fear of losing face”, “fear of being focus of attention”, and “fear of being unable to follow and understand others” [3]. All of these worries cause students’ anxiousness of speaking English. Since the anxiety and nervous mental quality, it is difficult for students to speak English in public, and this affects their achievements in oral English [2]. 4) the crucial problem is unsatisfied teacher qualification, especially in rural areas. Based on Chen and Goh’s interview, many teachers worry that they cannot effectively organize students’ oral activities because of their low self-efficacy and insufficient quality [1]. In rural schools, English teachers may not be English majors with unprofessional oral ability that has influences on students’ pronunciation and intonation [1]. 5) In traditional English teaching, the emphasis of English is the fundamental knowledge, grammar and sentence structures, and teachers and students pay attention to reading and translation, while communicative competence in English is neglected [1, 4]. Due to these reasons, Chinese students are weak in speaking English.

Hence, the “dumb English” phenomenon needs to be ameliorated. It is beneficial for students that develop their English-speaking ability as early as possible because the age of language acquisition plays a significant role, and it is effortful to learn a second language in later life [5]. According to Sebastián-Gallés and colleagues, their study found that the age can affect children acquiring sound patterns of their new language, and it is difficult for children who learn a second language later in childhood [5]. Besides, it is a golden period to learn languages in the early childhood [6]. Therefore, nowadays, numerous parents let their children start learning English before they go to school. Meanwhile, what schools and teachers should do is to cultivate students’ spoken English when they are exposed to English for the first time in primary schools. Nevertheless, there are some problems in spoken English teaching methods in elementary schools. For instance, the class teaching atmosphere is so boring that students have no interests in attending in classes, and students cannot practice speaking English in classes because of the class time limitation [7]. Although teachers sometimes organize a few activities, it often needs individual students participate in and have nothing to do with other students [7]. In order to solve these problems, teachers can use the situational language teaching method to teach oral English.

Situational language teaching method (SLT), as its name implies, it is a language teaching strategy that teachers should create an actual situation based on the content of courses. Situational language teaching is simply called oral approach that developed by British applied linguists across 1930s to 1960s [6]. Its purpose is to stimulate students’ interest and activate them taking part in class activities through setting up a fascinating and attractive study circumstance [8]. For instance, if teachers want to teach students

greetings such as “good morning”, “nice to meet you” and “goodbye”, they can produce a real-life situation such as “go to school” and “leave school” [6]. In this way, students can quickly and effectively master the use of these greetings, and they do not feel dull. The implementation of SLT has remarkable effects on students’ spoken English. SLT can enhance students’ initiative to speak English and constitute their English thinking [8]. Furthermore, SLT can promote the development of students’ logical thinking, and guide their observation competence to motivate their imagination and creativity [8]. In situational language teaching, there are plenty of specific strategies can be performed. In this paper, three methods are illustrated to help teachers accomplish the situational teaching. These three concrete approaches are game teaching, movie teaching, and role-playing teaching.

## 2 Teaching Methods

### 2.1 Game Teaching Method

According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, “game” has four aspects: 1) an objective or purpose with detailed specification, 2) a set of regulations, 3) competition between groups, 4) communication between game players [7]. Therefore, game teaching is an association of education and games [9]. In primary schools, game teaching is effectively used to stimulate students speaking English. At the first time to learn English, pupils do not have awareness of learning English, but games can absorb their attention at that age. Hence, teaching with games in elementary schools can improve pupils to be interested in learning English, especially to be encouraged to speak English because there must be conversations and dialogues in games. For instance, if a teacher wants to teach students how to buy something, the teacher can invent a situation of shopping, and show students some actual goods which relate to vocabulary in textbooks, and students can use “buying expressions” that learned in class to interact with the teacher [10]. During this process, pupils naturally and unconsciously practice their oral English with enthusiasm. Because of this, over time, students will feel that speaking English is a fantastic thing rather than a necessary task that makes them feel stressed. Moreover, game teaching can promote students to speak English actively and creatively. For example, teachers can assign a “describing-drawing game” that students can work with partners. In this game, one student describes an object on the pictures, and the other one draws the object simultaneously, and vice versa. In “shopping game”, it is the usage of fixed sentence frames, whereas this “describing-drawing game” requires students to consider and create appropriate utterances independently. There are a few pivotal cores to notice when implement game teaching method: 1) the design of the game needs to be connected with the teaching knowledge and textbooks in order to achieve the teaching goals, and games should not only be for entertainment. 2) the teacher should not only be the instructor of the game, but also participate in the game with the students to stimulate students’ passions and make sure that the students have some practice in the content they have learned. 3) when grouping, the teacher should mix students who are good at English with those who are poor at English. In this way, students can help and activate each other. From students’ perspective, they are willing to communicate with each other continuously in English when they are playing games in

class [7]. Likewise, game teaching can alter teaching atmospheres and students are concentrated and energetic. The emerge of game teaching method into traditional teaching mode enhances the flexibility, novelty and diversity of oral English teaching in Chinese elementary schools [10].

## 2.2 Movie Teaching Method

In addition to the game teaching method, the application of movies is also a conducive strategy in primary schools' spoken English teaching. Movie teaching method indicates that teachers utilize movies to carry out teaching. In oral English teaching, teachers can create opportunities and environments for students to speak English through movies. In an experiment, Dikilitas and Duvenci (2008) found that the group of students who were taught a language by watching a popular film talk more and speak longer than the group of students who were taught through text materials [6]. Accordingly, movie teaching method is a valid manner to facilitate students communicate in English. Furthermore, movie teaching assists students with English-speaking via imitation that is called "shadowing". Students can further their spoken English by repeating actors' lines in a movie, and at the same time imitating pronunciation and intonation. Learning oral English by films, it is an advantage for students to accumulate idioms and slang words. They can acquire these particular representations and try to use them when they have conversations with others. Therefore, watching movies to practice can make students' spoken English close to natives. In order to accomplish the expected teaching effect, some key points need to be drew attention during teaching with movies: 1) selected films should be positive and healthy to avoid violation and negative information. Also, the content of the film must cohere with what students should learn. Students are easy to pay attention if the plot of the film is vivid and chosen based on their interests. The script of the film do not contain novel and difficult vocabulary, especially for elementary students. For pupils, cartoons and animations are the best choice by teaching with movies. 2) Since there is time limitation, teachers need to concern about the duration of movies. After watching movies, teachers should know about and evaluate students' articulation and pragmatics to adjust or improve according to students' feedbacks. Due to this reason, teachers should also schedule class time appropriately. 3) Background information and a synopsis of the movie should be given to students in advance. If the movie comprises extraordinary utterances such as slang, idioms or jargon, the teacher should explain them to students before watching the movie.

## 2.3 Role-Playing Teaching Method

Finally, the most common and popular approach in situational English teaching is role-playing teaching method. In oral English teaching, role-playing means that teachers and students play specific roles in a certain situation, so that students can have real oral communication through performance. Students should collaborate with others because they can be responsible for the whole group, and the interaction is encouraged [11]. Unlike just reading and writing, role-playing involves different areas such as emotions, body languages, comprehension of characters, and any sentence structures that are useful

under concrete situations. In the role-playing process, these aspects interact to open students' thoughts, and they are free to display their talents and imagination. Thus, students feel role-playing is intellectually engaging, and this can accelerate the frequency of students English-speaking. In the meantime, it will increase students' English proficiency in grammar and syntax. Role-playing is more impressive for students than just memorizing and reciting on pronunciation, sentence patterns, semantics and tenses. From this point of view, students will make progress in oral English fluency and accuracy. However, there are still inevitable issues when teachers actualize the role-playing teaching method in the classrooms, especially for teachers who try this approach at the first time. Therefore, teachers need to pay attention to several issues: 1) It is crucial for students to gain obvious instructions and directions in role-playing. Teachers should provide guidance to make students understand what they are doing and how to do it. It is favorable for students when they know about objectives and processes of role-playing. 2) Teachers should make senses that all the students in the class should be involved, and no one is singled out. It is because teachers should make sure that every student feels safe, respected [12], and welcome to keep them willing to speak in English without shyness, fears or anxieties. 3) Due to role-playing exists diversities and complexities, teachers should control and govern students properly. According to Ebbeck and Waniganayake, there is sometimes a noisy environment because many students usually do not focus on the practice and ignore aims of role-playing [12]. This requires teachers to carefully observe and remind students to ensure that each student can practice oral English.

### 3 Error Correction

In the study and practice of spoken English, mistakes are inevitable. It is the teacher's responsibility to correct students' oral errors. The high frequency errors that students often make are mispronunciation, wrong verb inflections and derivations, and the incorrect use of "yes" or "no". Mispronunciation reveals that the speaker's pronunciation is inconsistent with the true pronunciation of words. There are many reasons for mispronunciation such as unfamiliarity with the word, the wrong manner of articulation or the influence of accent. In fact, most students are afraid of speaking English since the non-standard accent. Hence, teachers can help students establish confidence and encourage them to English actively and frequently. Additionally, it is difficult for students to keep both fluency and accuracy simultaneously in spontaneous speech. For example, there is often lack of verb agreements and tense errors such as "I am eat chicken for dinner yesterday." The most confused problem for Chinese students is answering with yes or no. For the simple question "Do you like English?", it is easy to answer. For questions like "Don't you like English?" or "you don't like English, do you?", the answers to these questions often confuse Chinese students because of the opposite of Chinese thinking and English thinking. In English, "yes" and "no" are answered on a case-by-case basis. For instance, in order to answer the question "she isn't a doctor, is she?", the answer is "yes" for she is a doctor, and "no" for she is not a doctor. By contrast, in Chinese, the answer is "no" for she is a doctor, and "yes" for she is not a doctor. This kind of difference in English and Chinese often cause logical confusion when talk in English. These errors can lead listeners to misunderstand of the speaker's utterances. Therefore,

in daily study and practice, students and teachers should pay attention to the mistakes in spoken language and correct them. Based on Schachter, Doughty, Lyster & Ranta, some approaches of error corrections are concluded: 1) explicit correction, 2) implicit correction, 3) clarification request, 4) repetition, 5) recast [13, 14]. In class teaching and practice, teachers can use different error correction methods according to different students. For example, some students are afraid of making mistakes and have high self-esteem. Teachers can choose implicit correction to avoid decreasing students' self-confidence. For students with strong acceptability and learning capacity, teachers can choose explicit corrections so that students can clearly and quickly realize their speaking mistakes.

## 4 Conclusion

To summarize, students are confronted with the “dumb English” phenomena in China. This phenomenon indicates that although people study English for many years from the early childhood, they still cannot speak English fluently and accurately. There are five fundamental reasons contributing to “dumb English”: 1) no English environment, 2) the “uselessness” of English. 3) fear reasons 4) unsatisfied teacher qualification. 5) traditional teaching mode ignores oral English teaching. These problems are acute issues of English-speaking in China that should be settled, especially schools have responsibility to concentrate on these problems. It is because students begin to study English in Grade 3 at elementary schools. Since ages have influence on spoken English, cultivate students' oral English as early as possible can lay an excellent foundation for students to communicate in English in the future. Due to boring class atmosphere, time limitation, and no interests in class activities, teachers are hard to train students' English-speaking in class. Therefore, traditional teaching methods are not suitable for oral English teaching, and it is necessary to alter traditional approaches and try to accomplish new strategies. This paper talks about a well-known and popular medium which is creating an actual setting for students to enhance their positivity to oral English. This is called situational language teaching (SLT). There are three specific methods that belong to SLT are demonstrated. First of all, game teaching is an approach that teachers design and engage in games with targeted goals to excite students communicating in English. This method is mainly to stimulate students' interests in spoken English. Secondly, movie teaching is capable of practicing oral English through a manner of imitation and repetition named “shadowing”. It is a resultful strategy to improve oral English that many students frequently use. At last, role-playing requires teachers and students to act different characters based on certain contexts to promote students having conversations and dialogues between each other. Role-playing can impress students with pronunciation, syntax, and grammar. Thus, this can help students speak English smoothly and precisely. Nevertheless, in order to effectively achieve the purpose of teaching via these strategies, there are several elements should be considered. In game teaching, the key point is to make sure all students take part in games, and each student has chance to practice English-speaking. In movie teaching, the film selection is considerable to give students healthy and optimistic information. In role-playing teaching, teachers should keep students in touch with the objectives of role-playing teaching and do not neglect study purposes. In addition to the

problem of teaching methods, teachers should pay attention to students' oral English errors when cultivating students' oral English. The most common speech mistakes are mispronunciation, verb conjugation errors and answering "yes" or "no" incorrectly. Mispronunciation occurs largely because students are too concerned about their accent, so they always make mistakes because of nervousness when speaking English. The incorrect verb forms are mainly reflected in the improper use of tense. The wrong answer to "yes" or "no" is due to the logical reverse in English and Chinese. In English, answering yes or no depends on the facts. In Chinese, a yes or no answer is a response to the question. Finally, as mentioned in this paper, no matter how these methods are efficient, there are some problems when implementing these methods. Therefore, in the future, teachers should adjust or change teaching methods according to teaching policies and actual situations in practical teaching.

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