



How to Improve EFL Learners' Oral English Proficiency?

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Abstract. Speaking, as a productive language skill, has been a major issue in English language learning, as learners' success in English is often determined by how well they can communicate in English [8]. China, as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) country, the acquisition of oral abilities is a long-standing challenge for English language learners [16]. There are many factors behind this phenomenon. Many researchers point out that lack of authentic language context and few exposures to the language might be one of the factors [6]. EFL learners who lack of confidence and have anxiety to speak English is another factor [1, 7, 8, 16] also the interference of speakers' mother tongue will affect language learning process [1]. These factors may cause teaching such speaking skills in EFL context not easy.

This paper discusses strategies that can be implemented to improve students' English-speaking skills. It shows that the use of computer-assisted language learning methods can improve EFL students' English-speaking skills. The study may provide some insights for future research and some suggestions for teachers' application.

Keywords: English speaking proficiency · Oral English · EFL learners · Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

1 Introduction

As a medium of communication, the importance of English language cannot be over-emphasized. Many countries add English as a subject to the main curriculum, and testing students' English ability become a big criterion for entering the university. Especially for countries where English is being taught as a foreign language (EFL). As an EFL country, China is no exception and "English fever" has become a common phenomenon [5]. Despite the efforts in English learning, the English proficiency of Chinese people has often been ranked fairly low by most global English assessment reports. For instance, The Education First English Proficiency Index reported that China ranked 43th out of 86 countries [3]. The majority of English grammar, reading, and writing instruction takes up the majority of class time in schools nowadays, with oral English receiving less focus [9]. However, "languages are best learnt orally as part of a natural course" [16]. The oral component of English instruction is essential for children to learn the entire language.

Additionally, spoken English skills serve as the basis for reading and writing abilities. In 2021, China added an oral English test into “GaoKao” - the official university entrance exam. It is worth up to 50 points. The majority of Chinese parents and teachers, however, are unsure of how to teach oral English. Chang [1] claims that despite Chinese students who have a strong foundation in grammar and knowledge, oral English has been despised in Chinese English teaching methodology for a long time, which has led to the majority of students lacking communication skills.

With the development of technology today, many research have find the benefits of computer-assisted language learning can bring to the learners. Therefore, this study aims to explore how to improve EFL learners' oral English proficiency using computer-assisted language learning.

2 Technology-Assisted Language Learning

2.1 Individual Technology-Assisted Language Learning

Actually, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the 1960s consisted of a straightforward form of teaching programs accentuated by vocabulary games (such as Hangman) or behaviorism-based pattern exercises. Today's CALL can be more interactive and add more authentic content. Through English exercises based on behaviorism, for instance, students can record a portion of their English speech and immediately receive feedback. Using calling software, English language learners can have direct conversations in English with individuals all around the world. Recent studies have addressed the effectiveness of modern technology as a medium of instruction for language learning [8]. Technology-assisted language learning is effective for its low restriction on time and location, and it can be adjusted to align with individual language learning pace. Ample and interesting language learning forms can be motivating. For oral English improvement, technology-assisted language learning can be an effective tool to practice speaking. For learners who are anxiety about speaking in front of other people, using computer to practice speaking is a good way to lower their anxiety and build up confidence. Computer-assisted language learning can also provide learners with authentic language context, make the speaking process interactive, real conversation can take place through CALL.

Many researchers have found out that technology-assisted language learning have significant effect on oral speaking proficiency. For example, Yaman states that using voice recording to practice oral English contributes to the speaking skills like fluency, pronunciation, and also self-expression skills as well as lowering the effect on anxiety and stress [16]. Podcasting can also give EFL learners more “exposure” to the language, provide more authentic language environment through interactive conversations, and help decrease learners' speaking anxiety levels [4–5, 8, 18]. Also, computers improve learning outcomes because they are better at increasing student attentiveness than humans, which increases learning effectiveness [15]. However, Yang and Chang [17] report that there is no significant difference in students' oral English test scores after students using Skype as a language learning tool to practice their oral English.

Considering the types of technology-based strategy, there are two types to enhance oral proficiency -- collaborative and uncollaborative strategies. Above are all uncollaborative strategies -- voice recording, podcasting, and asynchronous CALL software. They are more straightforward and can assist language learners in practicing their skills. However, this type of language learning lacks interactive processes and authentic content. Thus, in future studies, it is necessary to emphasize collaborative computer-assisted language learning method, such as peer review [16], and more should focus on how to develop CALL software to improve learners' oral English-speaking proficiency [4].

2.2 Collaborative Technology-Assisted Language Learning

According to Yaman [16], "There is no equivalent substitute for the improvement of oral skills through dialogue and interaction between human beings in flesh and blood". The development of conversational competency and motivation in English language learning depend on real-world language experiences [18]. Therefore, is the authentic conversation online can be effective to enhance speaking proficiency? Study by Yang et al. [18] had empirical data to support that instant voice call with the assistance of structured discussion and English teaching assistants (ETAs), can improve both oral English proficiency and English learning motivation. Further study continued to research on structured and unstructured discussion, and as Yang and Chang [17] reported, students who participated in structured online Skype discussions did not show higher levels of oral proficiency than those in unstructured discussions. Another research outlining the importance of technology-based online communication language learning method was conducted by Payne and Whitney [11], the study pointed out that synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) could indirectly improve students' English oral proficiency. It also showed that students who had structured online English-speaking classes outperformed than students who have face-to-face classes [11].

2.3 Limitations

Although there are significant amount of evidence to support the effectiveness of technology-based language learning. The above studies have some limitations. Many studies have few participants, some less than 30, which may cause the issue of generalizability. Other limitation was that the teachers in the control and experimental groups were different from one another, which may have had an impact on how the students perceived the teachers' teaching in the classroom. Apart from the limitations that mentioned in these studies, the disadvantages of technology-assisted language learning can not be ignored as well.

2.4 Disadvantages of Technology-Assisted Language Learning

Although computer-assisted language learning has many benefits for EFL learners to enhance their oral English competency, it also faces many disadvantages which can affect the learning process. First, the rich forms of digital language learning may easily distract young learners' attention while learning, young learners only focused on the

games and the fun activities but ignore the essence of English language learning through computer-assisted language learning software. Besides, this form of language learning requires much longer time on computer screens. This may increase learners' eye pressure. Learners have to stay in place for a long time and this will increase the risk of illness.

Another major concern is that some of the English language learners are young. When there is too much access to technology, especially their is an language learning game, they can become addicted to the screen.

Besides, technology-assisted language learning are not taught by human. Thus, it is not personalized which may make the learning ineffective for some learners. The implement of CALL should consider these negative factors.

3 The Application of the CALL

Modern technology provides sufficient opportunities to support and enrich formal language learning. For Computer-assisted language learning method, it is vital to take advantage of its strengths to adjust its weakness. In other words, improve the current CALL method to make it more personalized, interactive, authentic, and effective.

3.1 Application for Improvement in Three Aspects

According to research results [16], CALL can be used to improve aspects like---pronunciation, conversational competency and motivation.

For pronunciation, CALL software can be applied to support vocabulary learning and speaking practice. Many schools, especially in the big cities in China, now are already using CALL software to assign students with speaking homework. However, these CALL software were still basic language learning application. They did not support interactive functions, such as having real conversations, peer feedback. Thus, for conversational competency, collaborative CALL software can be made to support authentic English conversations between users and provide peer feedback functions. For the third aspect, to motivate learners, the CALL software can be developed based on basic behaviorism pattern exercises. Learners can get rewards after they complete their learning. For instance, Sahrir [13] designed and created a web-based vocabulary game for beginning English language learners in order to provide interactive learning experiences for the learners and to enable them to better memorize the vocabulary with stronger interest.

3.2 Application in English Classes

Educators may also consider to add computer-assisted language learning into regular English classes, as a way to help reduce learners' anxiety and enhance their interests in speaking English. According to Lin's experiment, English writing skills could be increased and writing errors could be decreased if the flipped computer game-aided language teaching method was used [9]. In order to improve the students' sense of immersion and address the issue of students lack speaking opportunities in traditional English classrooms, teachers must adapt their teaching strategies and classroom materials for Chinese students [9]. They must also simulate real-world situations by introducing

rich and varied contexts [9]. Games mechanisms like medals and points of competitive games can be provided for classrooms with low participation to pique students' interests in learning and foster a supportive environment of competitiveness [9].

3.3 Personalized CALL

The design of computer-assisted language learning should also be aligned with the need of each learner. All learners are at different speaking levels and will be interested in different speaking practice scenarios and language cultures. If you overstimulate young learners, they might stop paying attention to the actual learning. For learners suffer with eye illness, CALL should decrease screen time and add more listening time. Thus, CALL should offer learners with more options---age option, learning focus, learning forms, etc. Personalized CALL will make the learning more effective and more attractive for individual learners.

3.3.1 Individualize CALL Based on Age Group

The needs of the speaking learning process vary greatly by age group. For young learners, the learning content and instructions should be more attractive and easily understandable for them. Videos, games may arouse their interests more. Meanwhile, for adult learners, authentic interactive conversations may be more effective and motivating.

3.3.2 Individualize CALL Based on Learning Focus

Individuals have their own learning foci. Some want to practice speaking fluency. Some want to practice oral pronunciation. Some lack the opportunity to use authentic language. Some learners expect to use CALL approach to remember vocabulary, or want to focus on writing skills and grammar. Therefore, CALL software should be designed to have these learning priorities to meet the learning need of each learner.

3.3.3 Individualize CALL Based on Learning Forms

CALL software should have sufficient learning forms to support every learner. For example, video learning, game learning, learning through listening, sing songs, reading, real conversations, etc. Different learning forms are designed to suit with different learning requirements.

4 Conclusions

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of technology-based approaches to language learning in improving oral proficiency. However, it seems that using uncollaborative and collaborative computer-assisted language learning method are not being compared in those researches. And common suggestion for future research is that researchers should add peer review into the study to make learning process more collaborative. Also, there are some suggestions for methodology, such as using same teacher for control and experimental groups, expending experiment time, and having more participants. Based on above, this article provides the following research questions for scholars to discuss in the future:

Can collaborative computer-assisted language learning software with peer review help to improve EFL learners' oral English proficiency?

Once this question is answered positively, follow-up questions are explored:

1. Compared to uncollaborative computer-assisted language learning software, can collaborative computer-assisted language learning software with peer review help to improve EFL learners' oral English proficiency?
2. Are there any difference in the performance improvements facilitated by the two learning approaches? Which learning approach can better improve the learners' conversation performance?
3. Will CALL approach contribute to learners' addiction to computer?
4. Compared to impersonalized CALL approach, can personalized computer-assisted language learning software be more effective to enhance EFL learners' oral English proficiency?

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