Influence of Contextual Factors on Chinese Private College Students' Spoken English

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Abstract: Spoken English has long been a bottleneck for Chinese English learners, which is caused by not only the exam-oriented teaching mode, but also the negative psychological factors of shyness and timidness. Besides, in private colleges, high student-teacher ratio and less class hours also hinder the effect and efficiency of spoken English class. To improve spoken English ability, contextual factors including situational factors and personal factors were tested by a questionnaire with 201 students from a private college in Guangdong Province. Then an SPSS analyses were conducted on the correlation of spoken English and contextual factors. Special attention was given to the students who were good at writing but poor at spoken English, whose communicative mode, psychology and motives of spoken English acquisition were analyzed. The results indicated that non-verbal contextual factors related closely to students' speaking ability, among which psychological factors were the most remarkable. In addition, the students' autonomy was the weakest part and demand attention from teachers. Therefore, apart from language ability, cultivating positive psychology and autonomous learning could be break-throughs for spoken-English ability. The teachers should be more creative in creating a relaxing and interesting class by using multi-modality input in class. Besides, as mobile phone has become an indispensable learning tool, teachers should recommend more effective Apps and encourage ubiquitous learning. As a stimulus, teachers may use the Apps to assess students' progressive grades. To increase students' confidence in speaking English, pronunciation and fluency should be the focus of training, using Apps such as dubbing English movies. Furthermore, teachers should explain cultural differences and pragmatic aspect of English, such as body languages, customs, politeness and pertinence in expression to enhance students' cross-cultural communicative skills. Through such training, students can not only become a fluent English speaker, but also a cultural expert which is beneficial to their future career.

Keywords: Spoken English, Contextual Factors, Autonomous Learning, Psychological Barrier

1. Introduction

With the increase of globalization and international trade, communication in English has become an important skill for college students. However, to Chinese students, spoken English has long been a bottleneck hard to break through. The ability of oral communication lies not only in meaning level with correct usage of vocabulary and grammar, but also in proper use of intonation, stress, rhythm, stop, as well as body language which are necessary for successful cross-cultural communication.

According to the report of the first National Spoken English Competition (NSEC) in China, the major problems are "the students' language was plain and dull, lack of new ideas. Although most students could convey the message, yet they made mistakes in tense, voice, consistency of reference, etc." The report ranked students' abilities in descending order: (1) Understanding the theme and clarity in expression, (2) Organization of language and extending the topic, (3) pronunciation and diction, (4) volume, speed and fluency, (5) grammar usage and understanding, (6) intonation and confidence, (7) syntax, (8) coherence, (9) pragmatics, (10) rhetoric. Seen from the above, most students can master the basic language abilities, but there is still much room to improve in proper use of intonation, diction, transition, vivid

and idiomatic expression. The results of the test revealed the disadvantages of the current instrumental learning of English— monotonous input of vocabulary and sentence drills. As a result, the students overlook the beauty of language, properness of usage and richness of thoughts. Seen from the scores, only 20% of students could get a passing grade in pronunciation test and 43% in free expression of their thoughts. This is a wake-up call for us to reflect on the effectiveness of spoken English class.

In Guangdong province, the private school students account for 40% of college students, whose scores of entrance test to colleges are lower than those of public colleges. Given the students' lower English levels and lack of autonomous learning abilities, plus high ratio of students and teachers, the current teaching of spoken English is far from satisfaction.

Because spoken English is not included in most English proficiency tests in China, it is less valued in the exam-oriented teaching, and therefore, the class hours of spoken English are less than listening class. Besides, students are unwilling to speak English for fear of making mistakes or being laughed. Furthermore, there are also problems in spoken English class itself, such as less input of language materials before output, less awareness in cross-cultural communication and pragmatics, more focus on pronunciation and vocabulary instead of syntax and tense.

This study aims to explore effective spoken English teaching in private schools.

2. Literature Review

The concept of context was first put forward by anthropologist Malinowski. He applied "context of culture" and "context of situation" in studying primitive language. J.R. Firth further developed Malinowski's theory and divided context into linguistic context and situational context. Later, the theory is enriched by M.A.K. Halliday who used "register" to explain context, categorizing it into field, tenor, and mode, taking the factor of communicators to the foreground. [1] Lyons further specified the requirements for participants in an interactive context that the participants should be aware of their role and position, time and space, degree of formality, media, subject matter and appropriateness of language use in a certain situation. [2] Further on, the concept of context goes from static to dynamic, involving multiple factors in it. For example, Verschueren included more factors in communicative context, namely, language users, mental world (cognitive and emotive elements), social world, and physical world. [3] Therefore, the scope of context expands to cognitive context as proposed by Sperber and Wilson, in which psychological schema manifests how differences in experience and social factors constitute different cognitive abilities, an important factor in communication. [4] In this study, contextual factors refer to both linguistic context and cognitive context, yet focus more on the psychological and emotive factors, such as students' personality, psychology, motive of learning, and communication mode.

Actually, students' positive emotions, such as enjoyment,

excitement and curiosity in a class associate with several aspects of learning, like self-regulation and creativity. In Winberg's study, factors affecting students' emotional experience are divided into "personal variables" and "situational variables". Personal variables include students' perception of a subject, motivation, expectancy of success and autonomy. Situational variables involve fully clarified goals, novel tasks, and teachers' behavior that includes sufficient explanation, enthusiasm for the subject, keeping track of students' learning while supporting their autonomy. [5] These factors are intrinsically similar with the definition of the contextual factors in this paper and are inspiring to gain an insights into the importance of contextual factors in English learning.

As to the studies on oral English acquisition, they range from phonetics, vocabulary, sentence patterns and texts to cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, psychology and cross-cultural communication. Jung Chang summarized the common problems of Chinese learners in respect of pronunciation, rhythm, stress, intonation, connected speech, grammar, learning strategy and pragmatics. She pointed out that Chinese students usually learned by rote, neglecting practice and fun learning. Influenced by the negative transfer of mother tongue, their expressions were improper and unidiomatic. [6] With respect to fun learning, Cambridge University Press published a series of teacher's guide in class design, such us *Once Upon a Time: Using Stories in a Language Classroom*, *Dialogue Activities: Exploring Spoken Interaction in the Language Class*. As to learners' psychological factors, Rodrigo Araga`o expounds on the importance of emotion and faith in learning English; [7] F. Duygu Bora analyzes how emotional intelligence affect conversational skills from the perspective of brain's mechanism. [8] Chinese scholar Wang Chuming (2011) summarized the three complexes of English education: correction of mistakes, grammar learning and exam-orientation. [9] He argued that the effective ways of language acquisition are the interactive learning within certain contexts based on understanding and imitation, including reading, dialogue, rewriting or continuation of writing, so as to output with understanding of context. He observed that traditional teaching attached great importance to structural competence and "practice makes perfect", but they didn't integrate cultural and social knowledge into speaking and writing. Therefore, he sharply criticized that students who could speak fluent English did not necessarily produce sentences that could meet the norms of the target culture. For these fluent speakers who lack the awareness of pragmatics was called "fluent fool" by Hu Yanfen (2009) in her *Six Stages of Spoken English Acquisition*. [10]

To ease students' anxiety and increase willingness in oral communication, Tokyo Institute of Technology developed mobile spoken English practice system [11] so that learners can interact with the system under a simulated situation anytime and anywhere. As Japanese people tend to be taciturn and reserved, many of them feel nervous to express themselves in English, but they can be more relaxed when

talking to the machine. There are many topics and sub-topics about daily life stored in the machine with large corpus to ensure the diversity and richness of the conversation. The topics are closely related to learners' life, such as class, homework, sports, job hunting, research, meeting, labs, part-time jobs, TV, presentation, travel, moving house, shopping, etc. Besides, the system can connect automatically with learner's social media account to get the information of their daily life and then include it in the conversation. It was proved that learners were more relaxed, so their fluency and expressive effect were much improved. However, due to the limit of artificial intelligence, the conversations based on pre-designed topics were satisfactory, but the interaction with the machine was less natural because daily conversations vary a lot are thus less predictable. In addition, the system should also improve its speech recognition and generation.

In order to increase efficiency of speaking class and involve more students in practice, online learning becomes very popular as a complement to traditial teaching. Various web-based learning platforms are widely used, e.g. Longman English Interactive (LEI) Platform. Wand Dan tested the effect of LEI and concluded that "It is true autonomous learning led by teachers (virtual and real teachers)." Besides the interactive training between computer and students, the platform also enables interaction among students and the teacher. [12] Due to the high student-teacher ratio in private colleges, using online resources to stimulate ubiquitous English learning is a tendancy.

Recently, there are more studies on the design of spoken English class at private schools. For example, Quan Lihong (2010) proposed graded teaching of spoken English, introducing the spoken English labs in Gengdan Institute of Beijing University of Technology. [13] The labs consist of test room, discussion room, presentation room and autonomous learning center. The spoken English test has 4 grades, scoring pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and subject matter. The freshmen of English major are required to take a diagnostic test to grade their level of spoken English, followed by instructions on further practice in the labs under the guidance of foreign teachers. There are regular tests during a term to check their progress with feedback of suggestions. Some students can move up to a higher level and some have to continue with the practice at their current level. The text and training alternate until the students reached the top level. This goal-oriented mode is helpful to push students to practice. Liang Juan (2013) proved the effectiveness of topic-based spoken English teaching. [14] She took students majoring in international trade as subjects, choosing BEC spoken English test material and other major-related topics in her class teaching, and achieved better effect. She pointed out that writing skills can be conducive to the accuracy of spoken English, and the materials for practice should be relevant with their major so that students can become more engaged in the practice.

3. Design of the Experiment

In view of the problems in spoken English acquisition discussed above and the research questions raised below, a questionnaire was designed to study the influence of contextual factors on the spoken English ability of private school students and analyzed it by SPSS. The statistics were based on the national spoken English competition scores of private college students in Guangdong province, their writing scores, and the above questionnaire. There are also open questions about students' suggestions on spoken English class and their strategies of practicing oral English.

3.1. Research Questions

(1) What is the influence of contextual factors on the spoken English ability of private school students Contextual factors include teaching environment, motives of oral English acquisition, learning strategy, interactive mode, psychological factors.

(2) Is there significant relation between writing skills and speaking ability?

(3) What are the preferable methods to improve spoken English?

3.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaires used a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". It has four parts and 7 questions for each part. They are "spoken English teaching feedback", "spoken English acquisition motives", "autonomous learning strategies" and "psychological factors and communicative mode". The subjects rated their responses by Likert 5 scale. The questionnaire was tested by 20 students for reliability and validity. The result was $\alpha= 0.82$, $P<0.001$.

Design of the questionnaire:

(1) Class atmosphere and language input: To check whether the class design encouraged students to involve and express freely, such as the difficulty and interest of topics, whether there were pre-activities like reading, writing and listening before speaking.

(2) Motives of spoken English acquisition: To find out whether students were aware of the importance of spoken English or their purposes for it.

(3) Learning strategies: To learn how post-90s students differed from earlier generation in learning English, and how and how long they were exposed to English culture.

(4) Psychological factors: To find out what caused unwillingness in public speaking in English, such as unconfident in pronunciation, timidity, nervousness, incompetency in social interaction, low self-esteem.

(5) Communicative mode: To know how students' personality and social interactive mode influenced their spoken English.

3.3. Data Collection

After the national spoken English competition, 250 English-major contestants were invited to complete the questionnaire, of which 201 were valid. As most subjects were girls from Guangdong province, so gender and geography differences were not analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

According to the feedback of spoken English class, descriptive statistics is used to analyze students' opinions.

The correlation of writing and speaking ability was tested by SPSS. For those special subjects whose writing scores were lower than average but speaking score higher than average or the opposite, their psychological factors and communicative mode were further analyzed.

To test the correlation and significance of motive, learning strategies, psychological factors and communicative mode (variables) with spoken English scores, the values for questions under the same category (e.g. psychological factor) were averaged and assigned to the variable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Feedback of Spoken English Class

Table 1. Statistics of the Feedback of Spoken English Class.

Questions	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard deviation
Interest of the class	201	1	5	4.27	.926
Cross-cultural communication	201	1	5	4.21	.761
Increase class hour	201	1	5	3.96	.842
Increase input	201	1	5	3.93	.905
Lack of vocabulary and thoughts	201	1	5	3.76	.897
Influence of writing skills	201	0	5	3.47	.889
Lively class atmosphere	201	1	5	3.16	1.148
Be able to use body language and tone	201	1	5	3.11	.871

From the values of the above questions, students were more eager to have fun in spoken English class, scoring 4.27. What came next was their expectation to learn more about cross-cultural communication and have more spoken English class, which is consistent with what the experts advocate. From the feedback, students were not satisfied with their pronunciation and use of body language.

4.2. Correlation of Spoken English Ability and Contextual Factors

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Spoken test score	51.9829	11.09814	201
Autonomous learning	3.0886	0.53689	201
Psychological factors	3.1642	0.62931	201
Communication	3.0630	0.71601	201
Motive	3.6878	0.53079	201

Table 3. Correlation of Spoken English Ability and Non-verbal Contextual Factors.

Correlation	variables	spoken English score	auto-learning	psychology	communication	motive
Pearson correlation coefficient	spoken English	1.00	0.119	0.197	0.156	0.135
	auto-learning	0.119	1.000	0.562	0.472	0.267
	psychology	0.197	0.562	1.000	0.619	0.294
	communication	0.156	0.472	0.619	1.000	0.273
	motive	0.135	0.267	0.294	0.273	1.000
One-sided test of significance	spoken English	.	0.046	0.003	0.013	0.028
	auto-learning	0.046	.	0.000	0.000	0.000
	psychology	0.003	0.000	.	0.000	0.000
	communication	0.013	0.000	0.000	.	0.000
	motive	0.028	0.000	0.000	0.000	.

Seen from the means, they were all above 3, but standard squares showed the differences of these factors were not big. The correlation between the independent and dependent variables were all above 0.1 and reached significant level ($p<0.05$) which showed contextual factors and spoken English scores had linear regression relation. However, as the subjects' average spoken English score is only 52, considering the academic gap between students from public and private colleges, their autonomous learning and confidence level were low, which might be the reason for the relatively low coefficient value. Remarkably, only psychological factors went into regression equation, $P<0.01$, which was consistent with the expectation of the study. It indicated that overcoming nervousness could be the most effective way to improve spoken English ability, and the key to improving spoken English was to foster positive psychology.

Among the four contextual factors, the correlation between psychological factors and spoken English ability was the

highest, followed by communication modes and motives, which meant the willingness to communicate with others in English, could propel the progress in speaking. The mean of learning motive scored highest (3.69), which meant students had awareness of the importance of spoken English. Comparatively, the correlation of autonomous learning ranked the lowest. The results showed that the students had not formed the habit of self-learning. Taking the question "learning English for 1 hour spontaneously" for example, the mean was 3, which meant only 50% of the subjects had the initiative in learning English. Therefore, cultivating the habit of self-learning could be a break-through for spoken-English ability.

4.3. Correlation between Writing and Speaking Skills

Table 4. Descriptive Analysis of Writing and Speaking Skills.

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Spoken English score	201	32.60	89.24	51.9829	11.09814
Writing score	139	53.00	89.00	72.7770	7.34950
Valid samples	139				

Table 5. Correlation between Speaking and Writing Skills.

Correlation	Variables	Speaking	Writing
Pearson correlation coefficient	Speaking	1.000	0.060
	Writing	0.060	1.000
One-sided test of significance	Speaking	.	0.240
	Writing	0.240	.
Valid samples	139		

The Pearson correlation coefficient is only 0.06, and P=0.24, much greater than 0.05, meaning their correlation was not significant, which was against the expectation of the study. Maybe small sample size (139) was one of the reasons. Besides, a noteworthy phenomenon was found that there were 12 subjects whose wring scores were lower than average but speaking above average, accounting for 8.6%（12/139）, and 24 subjects whose writing scores were higher than average but speaking below average. The inconsistency rate was up to 25.8% (36/139), which may also contribute to the low correlation. So those students' were singled out those students and divided them into two groups, speaking score above average, writing below average, and speaking below average, writing above average. Their psychological factors were further analyzed and remarkable differences found.

Table 6. Group 1 Descriptive Statistics (speaking above average, writing below average).

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Spoken test score	68.9183	12.23065	12
Communication	2.8333	0.93744	12
Desire to express oneself	2.9167	0.99620	12
Confidence	3.3333	0.77850	12
Social interaction	3.2500	0.86603	12
Not afraid of losing face	3.5000	0.79772	12
Willing to Share thoughts	3.8333	0.38925	12
Impromptu Speak	3.3333	0.88763	12

d1=3.29 (mean of the psychological and communicative factors in the above table)

Table 7. Group 2 Descriptive Statistics (speaking below average, writing above average).

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Sample size
Spoken test score	45.9758	4.75255	24
Communication	3.1667	0.70196	24
Desire to express oneself	2.9167	0.92861	24
Confidence	2.9583	1.08264	24
Social interaction	3.2500	0.79400	24
Not afraid of losing face	2.9167	0.97431	24
Willing to Share thoughts	3.6250	1.09594	24
Impromptu Speak	2.7500	0.89685	24

d2=3.08 (mean of the psychological and interactional factors in the above table)

In the 139 samples, only 36 shows inconsistency of writing and speaking competence, which means usually students with good command of writing can speak well. Taking a close look at these discrepancies, the average value of psychological and interactional factors of Group 1 is higher than that of Group 2 by 0.21. Due to small size of the sample, maybe it is not of statistic significance. However, seen from the values, the subjects whose speaking is better but writing is poor have better psychological quality in that they are more confident in their pronunciation, dare to speak impromptu, do not care about being laughed at and are willing to share knowledge and thoughts with others.

4.4. Summary of Students' Feedback for Each Module

4.4.1. Suggestions on Spoken English Class
a) Atmosphere: relaxing, interesting, encouraging to speak
b) Teaching: assignment for topic before the class, simulated task, interaction with machine.
c) Content: closely related to life, learn to use idiomatic

expressions.

   d) Class hour: increase class hour, have spoken English class in third and forth year of college.

4.4.2. Motives of Spoken English Acquisition

   a) It's cool to speak fluent English.
   b) Be more competitive in job hunting
   c) Communicate with foreigners
   d) A direct way to show one's English level
   e) Understand another way of thinking
   f) Going abroad

4.4.3. Autonomous Learning Strategies

   a) Reading loudly, shadowing
   b) Watching English movies, shows, listening to English songs
   c) Talking to oneself or friends in English
   d) Do more reading, writing, talking in English

4.4.4. Psychological Barriers

Most students reflected that they were nervous and afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. They were not sure about their expression and pronunciation. Besides, their mind would go blank and couldn't utter a full sentence when speaking in public.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

Multi-modality input. The study showed that non-verbal contextual factors related closely to students' speaking ability. The improvement of speaking involves both language ability and positive changes of thought pattern and psychology. Seen from the discrepancies of speaking and writing skills, the acquisition of spoken English is different from others as students' learning strategies, interaction and emotion factors all come into play. Therefore, the teachers should put more thoughts into the class design, considering the characteristics of post-90s generation and choosing topics related to their life. Secondly, multi-modality teaching should be adopted to create an authentic language environment combining input from blackboard, PPT, pictures, objects, videos, audio recordings, etc. Besides, the class atmosphere should be relaxing, encouraging and enjoyable to involve more students in various activities, such as group discussion and role play.

Autonomous and ubiquitous learning. Due to high student-teacher ratio and less class hours, on one hand, the class efficiency should be improved; on the other hand, autonomous learning methods should be encouraged. Given that the private school students lack self-motivation, the teachers should be more creative in guiding and supervising them to develop self-learning strategies, e.g. spoken English practice and regular test.

Using English learning Apps. It is noteworthy that some students suggested "practice English with machine" which shows students' desire to increase interaction in English in a simulated environment. Nowadays, with the development of artificial intelligence, more and more Apps for English learning appear, such as mini translation machine. Besides, the

students should be encouraged to use English learning Apps such as "Hellotalk", "Fluent English talk", "fun English dubbing" or chat in English on social media network. The teachers may include the records of self learning on the Apps in students' progressive grades to stimulate their interest.

Cultivating experts of cross-cultural communication. A lack of confidence is a major reason for shyness in speaking English. Therefore, pronunciation and fluency should be the focus of training. Dubbing English movies is a good way to imitate native speakers in pronunciation, intonation and rhythm. Furthermore, during class, the teachers should explain cultural differences and pragmatic aspect of English while watching English movies or dubbing, such as body languages, customs, politeness and pertinence in expression. Through such training, the students can not only become a fluent English user but a cultural expert which is beneficial to their future career.

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