



Three Factors Leading to the Poor English Oral Performance of Chinese Teenage English Learners

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ABSTRACT. Around the world, people use English as the general purpose language. In China, most students will learn English through primary school, junior high, and high school. The standard of mastering a language is how the learners can precisely and accurately use it. Daily communication (speaking), on the other hand, fully embodies the learners' master's degree. According to the annual average TOEFL and IELTS score report, a common phenomenon has been found that Chinese teenagers perform worse in oral English. However, there is not much research on this question. So, this essay discusses three factors that may lead to this phenomenon from three aspects: social culture, the effect of L1 on L2 acquisition, and English teaching patterns in China. For the aspect of social culture, tests are the main purpose and the reason why so large amount of Chinese students learn English. For the aspect of L1 influence, we consider the way how Chinese is organized and pronounced as a factor causing errors in English speaking. For the aspect of English teaching pattern, we conclude that the combination of the test-oriented environment, the English teaching method, and the variations between Chinese native English tests and English tests from an English-speaking country contributes to the overall imperfect oral English performance of Chinese students.

Keywords: Chinese teenagers, poor English speaking performance, reasons.

1 Introduction

In modern society, English has become the main communication tool in many aspects such as education, business, the internet and entertainment [1]. According to a passage in China Daily in 2010, there are about 400 million English students, which is 33% of Chinese population, and teenagers have made a crucial component. As time pass, the popularity of English learning is constantly increasing in China. When the new millennium began, approximately 94 percent of those who had studied one or more foreign languages, or about 416 million individuals, had studied English, making the total number of persons who had learnt some English around 390 million[2]. In China, English is a standard subject that is utilized to examine students' ability of

English, such as in the high school entrance exam, college entrance exam, and CET, which all are tests that can examine whether the student is qualified for further English learning. In China, undergraduates are the major objects who take CET tests, and they take any disciplines as majors except English [3]. As these tests require, students need to reach a very criterion in four parts: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. However, although experienced such intense acquisition, it can be obviously noticed that Chinese students may perform worse in English speaking than the other three aspects which are reading, listening, and writing. There has been ample research about English-speaking acquisition. The number of words a person knows in one language, or their vocabulary width, was negatively connected to their vocabulary breadth in another language. Also, any or all of the following can result from L1 influences: mistakes, avoidance, overproduction, and limitations on learners' hypotheses [4,5]. And data from the annual Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL Tests and Test taker performance in IELTS can support this phenomenon [6,7].

Although spoken English does not seem to be that important in China, with the gradual integration into the rest of the world in trade and exchange during the past forty years because of the reform and opening-up policy, more and more opportunities were created for interaction between its own population and people from other nations [8]. With the development and globalization of China, spoken English is more needed and received more attention: A survey based on Chinese university graduates found that the graduates' proficiency in English is corresponding to their starting salary [9]. Due to the increasing importance of spoken English, this article's goal is to identify and analyze factors that cause the poor oral English performance of Chinese teenage learners, as well as provide suggestions to deal with it.

According to current research and findings on this phenomenon, there are various factors that can affect learners' English speaking skills, including performance condition pertinence, learners' listening ability and topical knowledge, feedback from others during speaking processes, phonology, syntax, vocabulary and semantics, as well as psychological aspects of motivation and personality and the negative feelings like anxiety when speaking English [10-16]. These researchers have already illustrated lots of different factors which may have influenced learners' English oral performance and conducted an insightful explanation of their findings in their articles. While these results of prior studies were too scattered to form a systematic explanation of this phenomenon and data were all analyzed in different social and cultural backgrounds. Based on these inadequacies, three main factors which may lead to poor English oral performance will be analyzed in this article, which are, social-cultural backgrounds, consequences of the first language (L1) learning on acquisition of the second language (L2), the way English is taught and the way students acquire it. The target population will be Chinese teenagers in order to focus on the contexts of Chinese. The value of this article is to provide a more detailed and structured explanation of learners' poor English oral performance, specifically focusing on the cultural background of China.

2 From the Aspect of Social Culture

The influences of social-cultural factors on second language acquisition can be typically embodied in the social purposes of learning L2. There are three main reasons for second language acquisition. The first purpose is second language learning (SL) which is learning a second language for interaction in a community where L2 is spoken as a native language. Foreign language learning (FL) is the second one, which means the learners studying an L2 in an academic environment with little or no opportunities to use the language in daily life or interact with native speakers. And the third one is auxiliary language learning (AL), which is the acquisition of an L2 for particular reasons or purposes. For most Chinese teenage English learners, the social purpose or reason for acquiring English is learning it as a foreign language (FL). English is compulsory in almost every part of China so that the students learn it in order to get high marks on the tests or pass the examination. And as a result of this, written English is emphasized much more than oral English in the Chinese context and it can be one of the factors which lead to the poor English oral performances of Chinese teenage learners. This argument can be supported by the study conducted on junior middle school students by Long, Ming and Chen. The researchers chose 45 junior middle school students who started learning English in primary school and they were asked to answer the questions on a questionnaire. Finding out the students' motivation for English learning was the goal of this study. The results of their research showed that 66.7% of the students considered that the reason or motivation for acquiring English is to pass the examination and achieve high scores in it, and the purpose of 40% of the students is to avoid punishment and get praise from their parents and teachers [17]. This indicated that most of the students learn English just for the exam so in this case, oral English is less important than written English among Chinese teenage learners. According to the research, the social purpose of second language acquisition is one of the factors which may lead to the poor English oral performances of Chinese teenage learners.

3 From the Aspect of First Language Influences

Besides the influences of social-cultural factors, the effect of first language (L1) on second language (L2) acquisition is widely considered to play a significant role in language learning as well [18]. According to prior research, this effect can be embodied as language transfer, which is one of the stages in interlanguage development that transfer the prior knowledge from L1 to L2. There are two main types of transfer that take place: positive transfer and negative transfer [19]. This article is going to focus on the "errors" that results from the improper use of an L1 structure or rule in an L2 utterance, which is known as the negative mother tongue transfer [19]. Yi Zhao, Yuyao Lu, Ke Tao and Yanhua Yuan pointed out the reasons for negative mother tongue transfer in the Chinese context, which are the influences of the social environment, the lack of language input and cultural intervention [20]. Based on the current findings, pronunciation and grammar are the two aspects analyzed in this article

in order to embody the influences of negative transfer on Chinese teenage learners' English oral performances.

Tingting Zheng and Qi'ang Liu emphasized that although Chinese learners studied English for a long time as their second language, they still have plenty of English pronunciation issues as a result of the negative transfer from Chinese which is their first language. In addition, they stated two main reasons for the existence of pronunciation issues. The first reason is that Chinese and English are members of two separate language families: Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, whereas English belongs to the Indo-European language family, and because some pronunciation rules in English are various from those of local Chinese languages so there is a difference between the two languages. The absence of some English phonemes from various Chinese dialects may also make it easier for learners to mispronounce words, and this is the second reason for the negative transfer [21,22]. According to Zheng and Liu, the problems with the pronunciation of English in four Chinese regions including Northwest, Central, Northeast and South were analyzed in the article. The findings showed that English learners in Northwest China have difficulties in identifying various phoneme pairs in English including [n], [l], [ei], [en], [u] and [əʊ] because of their failures in telling apart several phoneme pairs which they use in their dialects. Due to the confusing phonetic pairs and the absence of typical kinds of vowels in their dialects, English learners who live in Central China can not distinguish between different types of vowels such as [i:] and [i]. Learners who live in Northeast China have trouble pronouncing [ʃ] and [e], [l] [r] and [j] also because of the absence of some phonemes in Chinese and their inability to discriminate between two different vowels. Due to the absence of some kinds of vocables in their mother tongue, learners in the Southern regions of China tend to pronounce [r] and [l] [23], [v] and [w] incorrectly and misuse the vowels and consonants. The results of their investigation indicated that Chinese English learners usually transfer their first language's pronunciation habits and rules to English acquisition [21], which suggested that the nonnative pronunciation of Chinese learners can be one of the aspects used for the explanation of negative transfer of the first language to English acquisition.

The number of differences between the first language and the second language determines how much will be transferred from L1 to L2. Despite the fact that English is taught as a second language in many countries, including China, there are more differences between English and Chinese than similarities [21], which can also be viewed from the perspective of grammar except for the perspective of pronunciation. In order to investigate the negative transfer of mother tongue in English speaking, Yi Zhao, Yuyao Lu, Ke Tao and Yanhua Yuan randomly chose eighty-two junior high school students and asked them to translate 20 Chinese sentences into English. Then the researchers recorded the students' grammar mistakes to analyze the negative syntactic transfer. The results of their research showed that 18.4% of the errors were the omission of the subject, 12.7% of the errors were the order of the words, 45.2% of the errors were the tenses and 23.7% of the errors were the subject-verb inconsistency. Based on the analysis in the article, the reason for the existence of errors is due to the gap between Chinese and English: the use of subject is emphasized in English while it is usually omitted in Chinese, and there are various tenses for verbs in English while

not in Chinese and there are rules for the subject-verb consistency in English while it is ignored in Chinese [20]. This indicated that the grammatical rules in Chinese will transfer to the acquisition of English as L2 and the greater the differences between these two languages, the more obvious the negative transfer will be. It also suggested that the grammatical mistakes learners made in English speaking can be another aspect that embodied the negative transfer of the first language to second language acquisition.

4 From the Aspect of English Teaching Pattern in China

4.1 Test-centered environment

The factor that causes this phenomenon must be the test-oriented environment in China. Before further discussion about the influence, we should first talk about the cause of exam-oriented education. Parents and students are driven by life-long interests. Schools and teachers, government and officials are driven by political and economic interests, and publishers and editors are driven by economic interests. These four interests are driven by the same direction, resulting in great energy, which has become the continuous driving force for the implementation of exam-oriented education [24]. Exams can be taken by students as young as four, when they take the entrance exam for kindergarten. Students take multiple exams at the school, local, provincial, and national levels during their time in primary schools, junior high schools, high schools and colleges. Additionally, exams continue to be widely accepted and respected by Chinese society as a fair test for choosing the greatest talent for the social hierarchy [25]. Under these circumstances, students are forced to study English not for practical use but for exams, whereas in most native English tests in China, Speaking is always a nearly non-existing part. Meanwhile, in the most important exam, the college entrance exam (aka. Gao Kao), there is no speaking part in the English exam part. Therefore, obviously, speaking is an even more dispensable English ability for Chinese teenagers.

4.2 How English is taught

Under the test-centered environment in China, the teaching style of English is fixed and directed. Chinese middle schools and universities often require students to take a foreign language, most commonly English. From kindergarten to middle school, English is always taught in various forms. For example, the stratified teaching method of English teaching in junior middle school actually means that teachers adopt different teaching methods to teach English to students of different levels, and teach students according to their aptitude according to the actual situation of students so that students can use their existing understanding ability and level to carry out corresponding English knowledge learning. And junior high school stage knowledge of English is too abstract and complex, there are no other disciplines so easy to understand, so students are hard to grasp the knowledge to conduct a comprehensive and thorough stratified teaching can make students of different levels to a reasonable arrangement of the

corresponding learning tasks, so as to make the knowledge layer difficulty, to make English teaching activities carried out well [26]. The Chinese government has undertaken several efforts over the past three decades to promote English language education. This has included extending English language curriculum at various educational levels and developing new rules, standards, and examinations[27]. Although this method or the regulations seem to be plausible and appropriate for students' learning process, there are disadvantages. After long-term studying, the conception of the English utility of students is finalized. English should be a language that people use as a tool for communication instead of a compulsory curriculum or a forced test.

4.3 Variations in exams' content

As it is discussed above, the significance of speaking is ignored by the Chinese teaching and testing system, presented in both test patterns and teaching methods. However, the result that Chinese students perform worse in English speaking is derived from an analysis of the average score on the TOEFL Speaking test. TOEFL test is a typical language test that examines a student's English ability. Thus the Speaking part requires the test takers can flexibly use the English language, which contains the ability to conceive a well-organized and correctly pronounced response in a brief time. So the speaking part in a TOEFL test is undoubtedly incompatible with Chinese high school students' learning behavior. On the other hand, many teachers in China have designed many so-called speaking prototypes in order to enable the students to acquire a high score without accumulative application of English. However, this action switches a language test into a subject test. As a result, if students just cram the framework or prototype for dealing with the test, they may have little progress at first, but an excellent grade is still unreachable.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, according to prior research and based on our analysis in this article, the fact that Chinese teenage students generally have poor English oral performance can be supported. And as we suspected, the learners' purposes of acquiring English, the negative transfer of mother tongue to second language acquisition and the English teaching pattern in the Chinese context can be the three main factors that affect the spoken English of Chinese learners. Teachers and students should pay more attention to the similarities and subtle differences between their mother tongue and second language to avoid the negative transfer and make this situation better. In addition, the awareness of the importance of spoken English should be aroused and the English teaching methods at schools should be improved in order to provide the students with a better English learning context. Except for the three reasons mentioned above in this article, there will be some other factors that may lead to this phenomenon so that this can be further studied in the future. What's more, this article only focused on the oral English performance of Chinese teenagers, the spoken English level of learners with a

wider age range can also be investigated later in order to comprehensively improve Chinese learners' oral English.

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