# An Empirical Study on Speaking Proficiency Training for Chinese EFL Learners

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## Abstract

Improving students' speaking proficiency has always been a challenge for Chinese EFL teachers. With the traditional training mode students had low motivation to speak, insufficient exposure to authentic language input, inadequate teachers' instruction on social strategies and no collaborative learning environment to find a partner to practice English with. Aiming at solving the above-mentioned problems of traditional training mode, the research proposes a multi-dimensional training mode with DV as its media, task as its center, cooperative learning as its form, campus English native speakers as its resources, textbooks as its content. Results of the empirical study prove the mode to be effective in increasing the students' levels of speaking proficiency, social strategy and motivation.

**Key words:** EFL Teaching in Chinese Context; Speaking Proficiency Training; Task-based Learning; Cooperative Learning; DV

## INTRODUCTION

In China, the rapidly developing economy leads to an increasing demand for talents well-equipped with not only professional skills but also proficient language skills. Since early the 21st century profound and nation-wide reforms have been undertaken in English teaching, for instance, with expansion of English language education into the primary curriculum (Zhao, 2008). In spite of having obtained longer period of language training, yet the learners' performance is not satisfactory, especially in speaking. In job interviews given by foreign companies, they are too nervous to make a brief self-introduction. Most Chinese overseas students find language is the biggest obstacle that prevents them from getting used to the new environment.

## 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The inadequate ability of using the language in authentic world is due to the problems of traditional EFL teaching system. Students have been facing pressure of English written exams ever since they started learning English. They are facing entrances exams for junior high schools, senior high schools, universities, graduate admission exams, PhD entrance exams. Even after graduation there are English exams for a promotion. Almost none of these important English exams includes oral competence evaluation. Consequently English teachers adopt teaching approaches no more than grammar translation and audio-lingual methods with emphasis on accuracy of grammar and memorization of words, neglecting the communicative goal of language learning.

This research summarizes the four reasons for the learners' low speaking proficiency problems under traditional language teaching system into the following four "LACKS".

1)Learners lack motivation to practice speaking. Adequate input of high quality language is a precondition

for EFL learners to become fluent speakers. However, with the exam-oriented teaching system and Chinese cultural concepts of "face saving" and "avoiding showing off" students seldom practice English through reading aloud, speaking English both inside and outside the classroom.

2)Learners lack target language environment. Students are learning in a foreign language context where the target language is not the language of communication in the society.

3)Learners lack partners to practice spoken English with. Under the long-lasting academic competitive pressures, students are unwilling to practice English through cooperative learning.

4)Learners lack social strategy training. With insufficient classroom time, college English teachers find it really challenging to insert training oral communication strategies into language teaching activities.

The above-mentioned four issues in Chinese EFL teaching were a far cry from the four conditions for language learning proposed by Jane Willis (2002):

1) Exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real language.

2) Opportunities for real use of language.

3) Motivation to listen and read, i.e. to process the exposure for meaning; and also to use the language, to speak and write.

4) Focus on language-in order to prevent fossilization, and to challenge learners to strive for individual improvement, they need chances to reflect on language and to try to systematize what they know.

The purpose of the present study is twofold. On the one hand, based on the theory framework by Jane Willis the research proposes a multi-dimensional speaking skill training mode with DV as its media, task as its center, cooperative learning as its form, campus English native speakers as its resources, textbooks as its content. On the other hand, empirical study is designed to prove the effectiveness of the proposed mode.

To achieve these purposes, the present study tries to answer the following research questions:

1) Are there any differences in the speaking competences between the experimental and control groups?

2) Are there any differences in social strategies levels between the experimental and control groups?

3) Are there any differences in the motivation to speak between the experimental and control groups?

Both qualitative and quantitative instruments are employed to improve the reliability and validity of the study.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 Participants

The present study focuses on the effectiveness of the speaking skill training mode proposed by this research and was conducted at Dalian University of Technology, Peoples' Republic of China. The subjects are 60 EFL learners who are all none English majors undergraduates, with 30 in the experimental group, while 30 in the control group.

### 2.2 Instruments and Material

#### 2.2.1 Speaking Proficiency Test

The first instrument was part of samples CET–SET speaking proficiency test which was used as a pretest and post-test. It adopts a face-to-face group format with three students as candidates and one teacher as the examiner. The exam is made up of two parts: a brief presentation and follow-up discussion. Each of the candidates is given a prompt card, though relating to a same topic, but with different prompts either in the form of words or pictures on it. Given a 1-min preparation, each candidate in turn makes a 1.5-min individual presentation according to his or her prompt card. And then they should make a 4½-min group discussion to give further comments on the topic. The discussion part is designed to evaluate the candidates' communicative abilities such as clarification, confirmation, repetition, negotiation etc. (Jin, 2000b). This speaking proficiency test takes about 10 min in total.

In order to increase the validity and reliability of scoring, the research used a checklist revised from the checklist developed by Askari (2006) and Hughes, A. (2003). It consists of 5 parts, namely fluency, structure, communication, vocabulary and accent, with each component taking up five points. The following is the sample checklist for measuring speaking proficiency.

**The Sample Checklist for Measuring Communicative Abilities:**

**Scale I- Fluency:**

5-Speaks fluently.

4-Speaks with near-native like fluency, pauses and hesitations do not interfere with comprehension

3-Speaks with occasional hesitations.

2-Speaks hesitantly and slowly because of rephrasing and searching for words.

1-Speaks in single word and short patterns, unable to make connected sentences.

**Scale II- Communication:**

5-Communicates competently in the group discussion.

4-Initiates and sustains conversation, errors appear without interfering with meaning.

3-Initiates and but cannot sustain conversation, errors interfere with meaning.

2-Begins to communicate passively.

1-Almost unable to communicate.

**Scale III - Vocabulary:**

5-Uses extensive vocabulary in any domain appropriately.

4-Uses varied vocabulary to discuss general topics and in special interests.

3-Uses academic vocabulary, some word usage inappropriate, slightly damages the message.

2-Uses limited vocabulary, constant use of one word.

1-Inadequate basic vocabulary.

**Scale IV- Structure:**

5-Masters a variety of grammatical structures, almost no error.

4-Occasional grammatical errors but no problem with understanding.

3-Uses some complex sentences but lacks control over irregular forms.

2-Uses predominantly present tense verbs, constant errors interfere with understanding.

1-Severe errors make understanding completely impossible.

**Scale V- Accent:**

5-Acceptable pronunciation, with few traces of foreign accent.

4-Speaks with few phonemic errors, but almost intelligible pronunciation.

3-Occasional errors necessitate attentive listening.

2-Constant phonemic errors make understanding extremely hard.

1-Severe problems make understanding almost impossible.

### 2.2.2 Social Strategies Survey

The present study also uses a questionnaire to measure the EFL learners' use of social strategies. Social strategy is one of the six learning strategies classified by Oxford (1990). According to Oxford, Social strategies involve interaction with others through asking questions and cooperation as well as learning to be aware of the thoughts and feelings of others. The questionnaire is composed of two parts-personal information and the social strategy part. As for the basic information, except for specialty and gender, a general question on the personal attitude towards English speaking is also included. The second section of the questionnaire uses the social strategy part of Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). It consists of 6 items and assesses how frequently students use them to learn through interaction with others, such as asking the speaking partner to explain further the meaning of his utterances, or requiring advanced learners to correct language error, etc.

The questionnaire is based on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5, in which 1 represents "totally or almost totally unsuitable for me"; 2 represents "suitable for me less than half of the time"; 3 represents "suitable for me about half of the time"; 4 represents "suitable for me more than half of the time"; 5 represents "totally or almost totally suitable for me". For example:

1= totally or almost totally unsuitable for me

2= suitable for me less than half of the time

3= suitable for me about half of the time

4= suitable for me more than half of the time

5= totally or almost totally suitable for me

| Social strategies | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. | | | | | |
| 2. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk. | | | | | |
| 3. I practice English with other students. | | | | | |
| 4. I ask for help from English speakers. | | | | | |
| 5. I ask questions in English. | | | | | |
| 6. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. | | | | | |

### 2.2.3 Survey on Motivation to Speak

The research uses the students' frequency of answering questions in each semester to indicate the change in their motivation to speak.

## 2.3 Procedure

The experiment consists of three phases lasting for three semesters. In each semester students are asked to form a three-member group to accomplish extracurricular tasks relating to the topic of the text. Moreover they must took video of their performance and bring the video into the classroom for comments by the teacher and classmates. The difficulty of the tasks designed for each semester is increasing step by step. There are different training emphasis for students and instruction emphasis for the teacher each semester. The detail is as follows.

### 2.3.1 Phase I: Primary Phase

Task designed in the first phase is of primary level. Students are asked to take a video of their extracurricular activities such as singing English songs, dubbing the films, playing dramas, etc. The tasks are less challenging, because the students have ready scripts such as lyrics, movie lines, drama script to refer to so they don't have to produce an essay on their own.

The main purpose of this phase is to train the students to improve their pronunciation and intonation. The teacher is responsible to make diagnose of the students' pronunciation and intonation problems and give constructive advice on how to improve. The students should increase the awareness of enlarging the amount of their language input to get ready to make high quality language production.

### 2.3.2 Phase II: Intermediate Phase

Task designed in the second phase is of medium level. Students are asked to take a video of their extracurricular activities in their daily lives such as birthday parties, sports, traveling and record their own commentary in English. Tasks in this phase are more difficult as the students are independent from any ready scripts and they

must develop their own commentary for the video without any ready script.

The main aim of this phase is to enhance the students' awareness of improving the quality of their productive language. And the teacher should train the students on how to develop a well-structured essay by using grammatically correct sentences and extensive vocabulary in any domains appropriately.

### 2.3.3 Phase III: Advanced Phase

Task designed in the third phase is of advanced level. Students are asked to take a video of their conversation with native speakers in genuine contexts such as going shopping, traveling, opening an account in a bank, sending a parcel in a post office, borrowing books in a library etc. Kathleen M. Bailey (2004) refers such tasks as contact assignment. He points out that in designing a contact assignment, be sure the required information cannot be gotten by reading available written information. The point is to get the students to speak with people using the target language. The native speakers could be foreign teachers, overseas students, and foreign tourists.

In this phase the teacher focuses on developing the students' social strategies of talking to native English speakers in authentic situation.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Data analysis and Results

The data of the experiment were analyzed in different ways. Since a questionnaire is a quantitative instrument, SPSS 17.0 was used for more complex statistical analysis. The frequency of question answering of the students in each group was recorded and analyzed by Microsoft Office Excel since only simple statistical processing was needed. However, the results from only quantitative research were far from enough. To improve the reliability and validity of the study, we also collected data from the journals written by the subjects and recording of the interview given to them.

### 3.1.1 Speaking Proficiency Test Data Analysis

Students in experimental group make great progress with their speaking ability. First, to examine the speaking proficiency of the experimental group and control group before and after the experiment we used paired-samples t-test. The result is shown in Table 1.The data show that the experimental group made significant progress in the speaking ability (sig=.001), while the control group didn't make significant progress.

**Table 1**
**Paired Samples T Test of Pretest and Post-test of Speaking Proficiency Level**

| Group | N | t | df | Sig(2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experiment | 30 | -7.328 | 29 | .788 |
| Control | 30 | .271 | 29 | .001** |

** Significance level: 0. 01

### 3.1.2 Social Strategies Questionnaire Data Analysis

Students in the experimental group make great progress with their application of social strategies. 60 valid questionnaires for a survey of the social strategy application change brought about in the experiment were retrieved after the class visit. We used SPSS 17.0 to analyze the data. Paired samples t-test was used to analyze whether there is significant difference between the pretest and post-test results of the experimental and control group. The result is shown in Table 2. Data analysis shows that students in the experimental group make significant improvement in their application of social strategies (sig=.000), while the progress of the control group is not significant.

**Table 2**
**Paired Samples T Test of Pretest and Post-Test Social Strategy Level**

| Group | N | t | df | Sig(2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experiment | 30 | -5.066 | 29 | .000** |
| Control | 30 | -.847 | 29 | .404 |

** Significance level:  0.01

### 3.1.3 Motivation Survey Data Analysis

Students in the experiment group have much higher motivation to speak in class. The data in Graph 1show how many times the two groups of students answered questions voluntarily in class each semester. The statistics show that the students in the experimental group are becoming highly motivated to speak English in class, whereas the students in the control group remain almost the same.
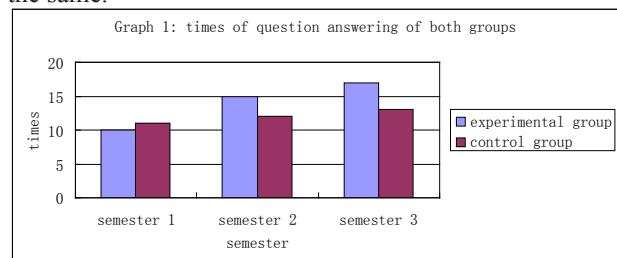


### 3.2 Discussion

The application of DV enhanced the effectiveness of the training mode and solved the problem of the students' insufficient language input under the traditional teaching system. According to Li (2006), "In order to develop language sensitivity and get enough input, students are expected to keep the habit of reading aloud about at least half an hour every morning; it is also necessary for them to recite some excellent or typical expressions." However, students usually find the mechanical repetition so boring that few of them can persist in their practice. The introduction of DV greatly stimulated the students' curiosity, creativity and desire. In order to make perfect performance and to sound like native speakers, the students poured much more time and energy into rehearsal through great amount of imitation

of the intonation of the actors or actresses in the movie.

The mode made a creative use of Cohen's SBI theory. Cohen (2000) proposed that strategy training should be integrated into the classroom language teaching. In the research students are required to use social strategies while completing the speaking tasks designed with a focus on the main content of the text, which is a perfect application of Cohen's SBI theory. What's more, the introduction of DV broadened the teaching dimension which overcame the barrier of time and space so that the teacher could advise the students on how to improve their application of social strategies. And the instruction was more pertinent to what was really happening in the authentic world.

Task-based learning (TBL) and collaborative learning (CL) were introduced into the research. Nunan (1989) pointed out that the learner has to be assigned real life tasks in language learning process in order to be able to use that language in real life. Slavin (1996) defines cooperative learning as "instructional programs in which students work in small groups to help one another master academic content". Burns and Joyce (1997) said that Speakers must be able to anticipate and then produce the expected patterns of specific discourse situations. They must also manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedbacks or redirecting. CL proves to be an ideal situation for the students to practice these skills. The students are using the language for the same purpose, and the CL provides the students with much more frequent use of the language. CL is the opposite of competitive learning, and competitive learning is a typical feature under the traditional exam-centered teaching system. One student said in his journal, "We were brainstorming, negotiating in English in order to finish our tasks, and we were greatly motivated when we found our collaboration skills, and communication skills had gradually improved."

Acquiring speaking skills is very challenging for students in FL contexts, because they have very few opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom (McDonough, 2009). The training mode encouraged the students to make full use of the campus resources of foreigners and exchange students. They make friends with them and invited them to finish the task together. One trainer described her experience of struggling to start conversations with a foreign teacher in the English corner this way: "At the very beginning, I felt embarrassed when I spoke to the foreigner, my tongue failed me, and I didn't know how to initiate the chatting. I was so nervous that I was fidgeting." After several times of accomplishing such tasks, she described her progress as follows: "Little by little I find that communicating with a foreigner is not as difficult as I imagined, how cool it is to discuss news and cultural differences with a foreigner in English. I made friends with them so that I could have more opportunities to practice my oral English."

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to solve the issues of traditional Chinese speaking proficiency training mode. Based on the EFL teaching theories and real context in China, the research proposed a new speaking proficiency training mode with DV as its media, task as its center, cooperative learning as its form, campus English native speakers as its resources, textbooks as its content. The empirical study showed that the mode was effective in increasing the students' levels of speaking proficiency, social strategies and motivation to speak. The mode provides effective solutions to the issues in Chinese traditional speaking proficiency training mode.

The EFL teachers should meet the challenges by making innovative changes in EFL teaching. Any changes with a purpose of improving traditional teaching modes should be based on theories, modern education technology and the real EFL situation with particular Chinese features. What's more, its effectiveness should be proved through practice.

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