

What Stops College Students from Speaking Acquisition

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Abstract: For many years, China has paid more attention to reading tests than oral English, forming a unique phenomenon called "dumb English" which has been widely questioned and criticized. Students in college frequently found themselves confronted with embarrassment in face-to-face conversation though having been learning English systematically for many years. The study identifies challenges that hinder learners' speaking acquisition by conducting an interview. The findings demonstrate that several hindrances contribute to such a dilemma: a) negative influence from the first language; b) insufficient meaningful interaction; c) ineffective input; d) affective interference. In addition, more in-depth consideration could be found in this study with several implications on teaching in higher education.

Keywords: Speaking Acquisition; Higher Education; College Students

1. Introduction

According to the China IELTS white paper in 2018 (British Council, 2018)^[15], there is an unbalanced tendency in academic performance of Chinese candidates that their reading performance is in line with the global average, while performance in other three parts are lagging behind, with the poorest performance in speaking. Some Chinese-speaking learners are even criticized as "dumb English" learners (Huang & Pan, 2011)^[6]. Given this, this study seeks to gain an insight into challenges that second language speakers in higher education are faced with contributing to their frequent failure in face-to-face spoken interactions. Furthermore, several pedagogical techniques are listed for reference in higher education.

2. Theoretical framework

Numerous theories and hypotheses try to give insight into the challenges that hinder learners' speaking acquisition.

Based on the interwoven relationship between first language (L1) and second language (L2), Learner's achievement in L2 learning is deeply affected by learner's linguistic transfer from L1 (Brown, 2000; Wang, 2017)^{[4][14]}. This proactive interference, so called negative transfer from L1 is responsible for language error occurring in English acquisition. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) lends more support on negative role played by L1 in SLA. Language error, such as the occurrence of pronunciation error, is perceived as a by-product of differences between a L2 and previous language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013)^[10].

Another obstacle to improving accuracy and fluency in English would be a low participation in meaningful interactional practice (Abrar et al., 2018; Huwaria, 2019)^{[1][7]}. From the interaction hypothesis, conversational interaction with interlocutor is an essential process in SLA. Encouraging using mother tongue or translation in English classroom partially thanks to the popularity of grammar translation teaching approach, however, is recently seen as a hinderance in developing speaking since lacking oral interaction (Al Hosni, 2014; Vietnam, 2015)^{[3][13]}.

Statements from interlanguage perspective provide evidence suggesting a close relationship between language input and language output. As learner receives increasing language input, L2 learners' linguistic systems will update systematically with an ever-closer approximation to the target language (Selinker, 1972)^[12]. Hence, language input is perceived as a crucial source for learner to make progress in speaking (Brown, 2000)^[4]. Additionally, comprehensible input will not be fully utilized by the learners if there is a mental block, that is, an affective filter. The "affective filter" hypothesis indicates that

learners' bad psychological states such as high anxiety would become the last stumbling block of the ultimate acquisition of a second language regardless of comprehensible input (Akkakoson, 2016; Lathifah, 2015; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014)^{[2][9][11]}.

To sum up, various sources has identified several hindrances contributing to a "spoken dilemma" in SLA. But few data exist indicating what perceived challenges in speaking acquisition faced by ESL learners in higher education, the present study thus represents an empirical contribution to this issue.

3. Discussion

According to the qualitative data from interview, existing hinderances preventing second language learner from being proficient in English speaking can be divided into four categories.

Firstly, the learner's native language is perceived as an interference in SLA in acquisition of spoken language. The interviewee further explained that literal translation or picturing language in Chinese beforehand is the most common way for Chinese-speaking learners to acquire a second language, by which they frequently found themselves confronted with embarrassment in face-to-face conversation. Numerous college students struggled to translate but sometimes failed to find any equivalent expressions in English. Such fragmented literal translation might contribute to college learner's comprehension failure in conversation, especially to those with lower oral proficiency.

Secondly, low participation in meaningful interaction inside and outside classroom might lead to learner's less opportunity to develop speaking skills. According to interviewee, there is not a supportive and encouraging learning environment for acquisition of spoken language both inside and outside classroom, as prevailing teaching approaches (such as grammar-translation approach) and current social needs (exam-oriented education system) discourage the improvement of learner's speaking skills.

Thirdly, immersion or English-only classroom with intensive language input is regarded as a possibly problematic teaching method. Under such circumstances, hardly can college students develop speaking skills with receiving incomprehensible language input. It seems that English-only teaching approach is unrealistic only catering for students with high motivation or high proficiency and would negatively affect learners' psychological and emotional well-being.

Fourthly, college students' affective issue is closely related to their oral performance in English. The finding shows that learner's negative emotion such as over-concern about accent and fear of making mistakes is another impediment in speaking acquisition. In other words, learners' psychological condition is likely to be a bottleneck to the acquisition process of target language, especially in speaking as speaking has been seen as the most "anxiety-prone" among the four language skills.

4. Pedagogical implications

There is no doubt that L1 plays a part in SLA and subconsciously impacts on language acquisition. What learners can do is not preventing L1's interference but being consciously aware of these interference-related problems, thereby avoiding or correcting fossilized language errors. Meanwhile, instructors are required to identify differences and similarities between languages so that they can make reasonable choices of teaching strategies tailored for learners.

Moreover, frequent participation in practices and interactions of target language is one of the best solutions to tackle speaking challenges, thus helping learners acquire language proficiency. If there is no necessity or opportunity to use the target language in daily life, it would be a real "foreign" language. Given this, learners themselves on the one hand can take full advantage of social media and online resources such as social websites to communicate with others from all over the world. On the other hand, it is teacher's responsibility to create more opportunities for students to gain maximum contextualized practice in classroom settings. In addition to environment establishment, teacher holds the key to the initial language input and language exposure as well. Thus, it is necessary for teacher to take learners' language proficiency and their level of acceptance into consideration in choice of language use.

When talking about psychological matters which are from my perspective intricately interrelated to other challenges mentioned above. For example, lacking involvement in practice might result in learners' lower self-confidence in their

performance and vice versa; long-term pressure and anxiety would cause learners' low efficiency in processing language input and vice versa. Therefore, it is hard to determine which one is the most influential on spoken language acquisition, also impractical to tackle effective challenges by emotional release approach or positive reinforcement.

5. Reflection

So far, the study based on qualitative data analysis has gotten an insight into the difficulties in spoken English and to what extent these difficulties pose a challenge to achievement of second language. Basically, these difficulties can be summarized into four aspects: a) interference from the L1; b) insufficient meaningful practice; c) ineffective input; d) affective interference. However, the generalizability of findings in this study is limited by the context in which the data were collected since the interviewee comes from areas with advantageous educational resources. More study thus is needed.

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