

The Challenges and Dilemmas of Spoken English Education in the Context of the Compulsory Education System in China

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Abstract. Many students in China are disturbed by their inability to speak English fluently, and "dumb English" is a common phenomenon among English learners in China. There are some problems in spoken English education in the elementary education stage in China, which to a certain extent have led to the formation of this phenomenon. Taking English education in China's compulsory education stage as the background, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with four front-line English teachers in primary and junior high schools to gain an in-depth understanding of the current situation of English education and spoken English education, and to summarize the factors affecting teachers' spoken English teaching and students' spoken English proficiency, from the perspectives of teachers, students, the education system, etc. The study found that teachers face problems such as their own weak spoken English ability and lack of teaching experience in spoken English; students often have problems such as inaccurate pronunciation and nonnative expressions; also, there may be some problems with the arrangement of curricula and teaching contents for every grade; in addition, factors such as over-emphasis on grades in exams, lack of funds and teaching resources, absence of a good language environment, and lack of attention from parents are all influencing teachers' work on spoken English teaching and students' spoken English learning effect.

Keywords: Spoken English Education; Teaching Methods; Challenges and Dilemmas; Compulsory Education in China.

1. Introduction

As the foreign language with the largest number of learners in China, and as a subject that appears in most of the school entrance exams, English has a pivotal role in the Chinese education system. Most students in China start learning English at the latest in the third grade of elementary school, when they are six or seven years old and continue to learn English until they graduate from high school. It is about 12 or 13 years of learning English. English lessons are also offered in most majors in universities, even though by this time many students do not pay much attention to it, as they are usually satisfied with just passing the final exams with a passing grade.

However, students in China have a recognized problem in learning English for a long time, which is "dumb English". Although they have spent more than a decade learning this foreign language, they still find it difficult to communicate smoothly with it. This problem is further emphasized by the fact that many students are able to get high marks in school on English reading, writing, or grammar exams, which means that they have no problem mastering the basic knowledge of the language. The students perform quite well in exams, but when involving speaking, they become "dumb".

This paper also focuses on the reasons behind this problem. There are many literature reviews summarizing and describing possible causes, but few studies have documented the thoughts and feelings of the teachers on the front line, the ones closest to the students. Therefore, by carrying on semi-structured interviews with several front-line English teachers, this paper will start from the perspective of them to understand the real experiences and thoughts of English teachers in the Chinese compulsory education system to explore the dilemmas faced by them. This paper is devoted to bringing the most realistic and practical rather than theoretical ideas to this topic, so as to supplement the ideas in the predecessors' research, and to help Chinese English teachers and scholars in the basic

education area and other areas to propose possible ways to solve these problems from a practical and feasible perspective.

This study will focus on English education in China's compulsory education system, because students at this stage are still in the early stages of English learning, and if problems can be identified and solved from an earlier stage, the more favorable it will probably be for the students' eventual English-speaking ability. What is more, language learning outcomes are usually deemed to correlate with the age of initiation, as many proponents of the critical period hypothesis have argued that the age at which a foreign language is initiated is inversely proportional to the eventual success of the language acquisition. Therefore, if the right approach can be used when the students are still young, it may be helpful for their language learning.

Therefore, this study endeavors to answer the following research questions: What are the problems in the common methods of English teaching that contribute to students' weak spoken English? What factors exist that negatively affect teachers' efforts to teach spoken English?

Data analysis software such as NVIVO was well utilized in the process of summarizing and analyzing the information collected in the interviews. This enabled the information to be clearly categorized and presented. In addition, some specific answers from the participants were shown in this paper to provide a better presentation and support for the analysis and conclusions of this study.

After organizing and analyzing the information collected from the interviews, this study concludes that the current spoken English education in China's compulsory education system is mainly facing dilemmas such as: teachers' spoken English proficiency and teaching experience, students' inaccurate pronunciation and expression, problems in curricula arrangement, lack of funds and resources, etc.

2. Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted to explore the causes of this phenomenon. For example, Wang classified in her review the factors affecting Chinese EFL learners' English fluency and accuracy into three categories, which are cognitive factors, linguistic factors, and affective factors [1]. Zhang summarized five causes from the aspect of spoken English teaching in her review: teachers' lack of competence in spoken English teaching, lack of phonics teaching in the classroom, students' lack of attention to spoken English learning, and students' lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes in front of people [2]. In addition, Wang and Liu also respectively gave similar viewpoints on the lack of opportunities and motivation for students to practice, as well as the lack of a language environment [3, 4]. Apart from China, teachers in many countries around the world also face difficulties in EFL (English as a foreign language) oral English education. One study, for instance, summarized these difficulties into seven items, which also included such common problems as faulty teaching methods, lack of language environment, and lack of student motivation [5].

3. Methodology

In order to answer the above research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research, in which four English teachers as participants from primary and secondary schools shared their experiences and thoughts. It is worth noticing that this study hopes to explore a situation that was representative of the broadest group of students and teachers in China, and thus the interviewees are from schools in some small cities or even villages. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be representative of the situation in some international schools, bilingual schools, etc., where teaching resources are much higher than in most of the ordinary schools.

The interview questions were categorized into three aspects: perspectives of students, perspectives of teachers, and perspectives of the educational system, clearly demonstrating the different types of difficulties that arise in spoken English education in the current Chinese compulsory education stage. The interviews were conducted via video call and the teachers shared a lot of insights when being asked about how they conduct spoken English lessons and what difficulties they have encountered

during the process. Because they are front-line teachers, they are very aware of how their students are and what problems and issues their students are facing, and they participated very actively in this interview.

3.1. Interviewee Recruitment

All participants in this interview participated on a voluntary basis. Before accepting the invitation, they were all given a detailed sheet of information including the content of the study, the purpose of the study, how their information would be kept confidential, and how the results of the study would be used. Participants all consented to the audio recording and their personal information was presented anonymously in this study.

According to the research questions, the interviewees in this study needed to be front-line English teachers in Chinese primary and secondary schools and to have enough work experience to ensure the richness and credibility of the information they provide. Therefore, the four interviewees are all English teachers in primary or junior high schools. They come from different schools and have different years of experience, but all of them have been in the position for at least three years to ensure that the interviewees are familiar with their teaching works, students, and the education system. These teachers who participated in the interviews were recommended by their colleagues and were contacted by phone. None of them refused to participate. Specific information of interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Background Information of the Interviewees

	gender	age	Current position	Years of working as an English teacher
Interviewee1	Female	33	English teacher for grades 3 to 6 in primary school	8
Interviewee2	Female	54	English teacher for grades 3 to 6 in primary school	24
Interviewee3	Female	34	English teacher for grades 1 to 4 in junior high school	10
Interviewee4	Female	45	English teacher for grades 3 to 6 in primary school	20

3.2. Interview Questions Design

The interview questions started with the collection of basic information, including the interviewees' work experience, such as how many years they had worked and what positions they had held. In addition, a general understanding of their teaching methods was enquired about, which included whether and how they have conducted spoken English teaching, as well as their feelings about conducting those works.

For the main part of the interview, in order to collect information more comprehensively and answer the research questions more clearly, the questions are divided into three perspectives, student perspective, teacher perspective, and education system perspective. The student perspective is to find out what problems students often face in learning spoken English, such as classroom engagement, motivation, and self-confidence. The interviewees shared their specific experiences and insights through their observations and knowledge of the students. The teacher's perspective is from the teachers themselves to understand the difficulties they encountered in trying to carry out spoken English teaching, such as their own lack of teaching ability or experience, inappropriate teaching methods, and so on. The education system perspective complements the interviews by analyzing the causes of the problems from an objective point of view. Participants shared their perceptions of the objective factors limiting students' spoken English skills and the difficulties in conducting teaching activities.

The design of these interview questions was based on the possible factors provided by existing studies, such as the problems of teaching methods and the lack of a language environment mentioned in many studies, so that the questions would be more pertinent. In addition, the interviews will eventually be supplemented with questions based on these studies. For example, many previous studies have mentioned the idea that "the absence of an oral test in entrance examinations has led teachers and students not to pay attention to spoken English teaching". If the interviewees did not mention this during the interview, the interviewer added these questions at the end to ask for their views on these ideas.

3.3. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by video calls. The interviews were all no more than one hour to ensure that the interviewees were not too tired to provide valid information. This was taken into consideration when designing the questions so that the interview outline contained around ten questions. In order to make the interviewees relaxed and willing to share more, the interview questions were asked in the order from simple and insensitive to complex and sensitive. For example, basic information, as well as their experiences, were used as a start, and then an analysis of the students, rather than asking about their own shortcomings, etc., to prevent the interviewees from becoming reluctant to share.

3.4. Data Analysis

After the interviews, the recordings were converted into texts using IFLYTEK to facilitate analysis. The texts were translated into English by the researcher. After familiarizing with the data collected from the interviews, it was coded by using the deductive method. The deductive approach was used because the interview questions were designed and asked from the three perspectives of students, teachers, and the education system, which are exactly the three themes in data analysis, and such coding and categorization would make the conclusions clearer. However, this study aims to know all the possible factors as much as possible, rather than assuming some factors that already exist to validate them, in order to prevent the study from being incomplete due to subjectivity. Therefore, not all codes can be categorized into these three themes. These codes and themes were organized and analyzed by using NVIVO.

4. Results

China's compulsory education system consists of six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school, with five years of elementary school and four years of junior high school in some other areas. Usually, children start their compulsory education at the age of 6 or 7. Three of the four interviewees in this study are elementary school English teachers. Interviewee 1 has ever taught English to grades 3 to 6 and has been in the profession for 8 years. Interviewee 2 has been an English teacher for 30 years, but has worked as an English teacher for 24 of those years, again has ever taught grades 3 to 6. Interviewee 4 has been an English teacher for 20 years, also teaching grades 3 through 6. Interviewee 3, on the other hand, is a junior high school English teacher who has been in the profession for 10 years, having taught first to fourth grade.

Four interviews were successfully completed through video calls. The interviewees were very willing to share their ideas on topics of teaching and enthusiastically talked about their feelings based on their own experiences. There is a wealth of material available that might assist in enhancing China's present compulsory English education system.

In addition, since they come from different regions and schools, and teach different students, the information they provide is rich and varied. Scholars and English teachers can thus see the difficulties and obstacles to teaching oral English that they have neglected in different teaching environments and conditions.

By using NVIVO, the information collected from the interviews was coded into 19 codes and categorized into 4 themes. As mentioned in the methodology section, the research questions are explored from four perspectives which are also the four themes in analysis: the perspective of teachers, the perspective of students, the perspective of the education system, and some other additional points.

4.1. The Perspective of Teachers

One of the difficulties encountered by teachers in teaching spoken English is their own lack of English skills and proficiency. This problem has been mentioned in many previous studies and this study further confirms the objective existence of this problem. The fact that this problem was mentioned by three interviewees indicates that it is relatively common in the current compulsory education system.

For example, two interviewees mentioned that when teaching some of the knowledge in class, they were not able to explain comprehensively and clearly in English, so they had to use Chinese eventually. Even for some simple expressions, the teacher might not be able to think of a correct English expression quickly and had no choice but to skip it. For another example, another interviewee recalled that she had ever asked students to bring their favorite toys to school and introduce them to their classmates in English, but some of the toys even the teacher did not know what they were called and had to look them up in the dictionary.

This situation is indeed influencing teachers to carry out oral English teaching activities. Interviewee 3 argues that "If I were fluent in English, I could use more initiative to carry out teaching activities and get rid of the textbook, and the content of the classroom would be up to me, but my English skills restrict me from doing so."

In addition to English skills, the teacher's experience in teaching spoken English also affects the effectiveness of teaching. Two of the interviewees mentioned that although they had studied teaching methods or received some English teacher training, very little of them was related to spoken English teaching. Interviewee 2 also said that teachers in her school would do teaching and research from time to time, but while doing it they rarely talk about spoken English teaching.

There are also some problems caused by the development of the area. In non-first-tier cities, many veteran teachers who have been in the profession for many years are not actually English majors, so actually their English proficiency cannot be guaranteed. Interviewee 4 said, "There were very few English majors graduating at that time (about twenty years ago), and many of them were selected by the Education Bureau as a group of young teachers, given basic training, and then started straight teaching English."

However, what is changing is that more and more teachers are now emphasizing the use of diverse teaching methods and class activities, and the use of traditional teacher-oriented teaching methods is less. Three out of the four interviewees mentioned that they use games to arouse students' interest and make them participate more actively in class. For example, students were asked to role-play some situational dialogues, and one of the interviewees even organized a small English stage show. Another interviewee said, "Every class includes engaging games and exercises."

However, not every teacher would do spoken English teaching. Interviewee 3, the junior high school English teacher, said that they seldom teach spoken English. What they usually do is ask students to practice sentence structures and words based on templates, which can hardly be called spoken English teaching.

4.2. The Perspective of Students

The participants also shared some of the difficulties they observed that students encountered in speaking English. This information is useful for teachers to help students with spoken English learning as well as improve their own teaching methods.

Firstly, there is a problem of pronunciation. Interviewee 1 mentioned that she found some students would mark the pronunciation of English words with their first language, Chinese. Interviewee 2 said that some of her students could not pronounce some words correctly even though they had been corrected a lot of times.

In addition, another problem is that most of the students are unable to flexibly apply their knowledge and express natively when practicing speaking. Interviewees 2 and 3 both mentioned that because students didn't develop an English mindset, it is difficult for them to use native English expressions, and they end up having to use "Chinglish" expressions, which will result in many expressions that are actually incorrect. Interviewee 3 gave an example: "The English sentence 'I go to school by bike' would be 'I ride bike go to school' in Chinese language structure, that is, ride bike and go to school are two parallel verbs, so many students would follow the language logic of Chinese and make mistakes."

It is also worth noting that many previous studies mentioned the phenomenon that many students are afraid to speak because of the fear of making mistakes, and the interviewees of this study all said that this is actually uncommon for most of the students in the compulsory education, based on what they have observed. Especially for elementary school students, when the teachers conducted speaking practice activities, the students were usually active and brave. As for junior high school students, interviewee 2 said, "It is true that junior high school students are more silent than primary school students, but it doesn't mean that they are resistant to speak. With guidance and encouragement, students are happy to speak."

4.3. The Perspective of the Education System

Regarding the education system, there are some problems with the content of courses. Arrangements for the content of courses are usually led by schools or the Education Bureau, and it is hard for teachers to change them, but in many cases, spoken English teaching activities are subject to these arrangements.

Interviewees 1, 3 and 4 all mentioned that too many teaching tasks and limited time resulted in them having to catch up with the progress according to the textbooks, leaving no extra time to be allocated for spoken English teaching. Interviewee 4 said that "there are only two English classes a week for grades 3 and 4, and three English classes a week for grades 5 and 6", and that teachers are only able to complete what was required by the school for the semester, with very little extra time scheduled for other activities. She said that English teachers around her generally believe that the schedule for English classes is too few.

Apart from that, regarding the content of courses, both interviewees 1 and 3 thought that the arrangement of content in elementary school was a bit inappropriate. Interviewee 1 thinks, "Elementary schools should make the curriculum a little bit simpler, and only oral English is tested so that it will raise students' interest. It won't be too late to learn more complicated knowledge in junior high school. At the elementary stage, I've been in contact with, students' interest starts to decline in the fourth grade, a watershed occurs in the fifth grade, and in the sixth grade, there are a lot of students who are not interested in the subject at all. If we only teach speaking, we will use only English to have conversations throughout the class, instead of teaching the grammar and memorizing the texts in the textbook. The teaching system now is causing half of the kids in sixth grade to lose interest in English." Respondent 3 said, "The main problem is the wrong order, because English is a language after all, and it should start with listening and speaking. Therefore, elementary school students should not be forced to learn too much writing, but listening should be the main focus. "

In addition, the fact that there is no speaking test in the entrance examinations also has an impact on the teaching of spoken English. Interviewees 2, 3, and 4 agreed that this factor led to a lack of emphasis on the learning of speaking by all parties, including students, teachers and schools. Interviewee 2 said, "Teachers in our school seldom teach speaking in class because everyone pays more attention to scores in exams and focuses only on boosting scores, ignoring the improvement of

students' speaking skills." Interviewee 3 mentioned that she found that some students are interested or talented in speaking, but since speaking is not a part of the exams and people do not pay attention to it, the students themselves do not have the awareness to improve their strong points of spoken English. It is actually rather unfortunate that students are deprived of the opportunity to develop their strengths due to the lack of attention caused by the environment.

What's more, interviewee 3 mentioned that her school used to have an English club but the club was not continued because the school placed more emphasis on academic performance and was not willing to sacrifice students' time for having classes to allow students to participate in club activities.

4.4. Additional Points

In addition to the difficulties teachers and students encountered in spoken English teaching and learning that arose from the three perspectives above, the interviewees also shared some other ideas.

The first is the lack of language environment, which has also been frequently mentioned in previous studies. Four interviewees all stated that this is a situation that is difficult to change. Interviewee 1 said that students will definitely communicate in their mother tongue after class. Although it is possible for students to speak more English in class, the small number of English class hours means that there are really few opportunities to build a language environment for students to communicate in English.

Besides, three interviewees mentioned the problem of lack of funds and resources. In some small cities and villages, it is indeed a very common but difficult problem to solve that teaching funds and resources are not as rich as those in first-tier cities. Interviewee 2 mentioned that one of the schools she used to work in had planned to recruit foreign teachers, but due to the lack of funds, it did not materialize in the end.

Interviewee 3 shared that their school had tried to promote a classroom model called "4213", in which students work in small groups to accomplish learning tasks cooperatively. This classroom model is very conducive to spoken English teaching, but it requires a complete set of new teaching methods and materials, and traditional textbooks and teaching contents cannot be applied to this classroom model. However, due to the limited capacity of the school's teaching and research team, and the school was not able to introduce the required teaching materials or arrange systematic training for the teachers, this classroom model was not implemented for a long time in the end. In addition, Interviewee 4 said that in recent years, the Phonics Teaching Method has been developed, in which students try to pronounce words naturally according to the pronunciation of the letters, rather than learning the phonetic symbols. However, she found that while some schools had introduced this method of teaching and organized training for teachers to learn the Phonics Teaching Method systematically, many other schools could not afford to introduce this method due to a lack of funds and resources.

Two interviewees mentioned that the importance attached by parents also greatly affects students' spoken English achievements. Interviewee 3 said that she saw that many parents in big cities, such as Beijing, would attach great importance to English speaking ability and would enroll in spoken English classes for their children outside the classroom. However, where she lives, in a small city, very few parents would do so. Interviewee 4 believes that daily practice is very important for spoken English learning, so she assigns homework to her students to practice speaking for ten minutes every day. However, this homework needs to be supervised by parents at home, but some parents do not attach importance to it and at the same time students lack self-discipline and self-learning ability, which leads to many students missing these opportunities for learning and practicing.

5. Conclusion

Many scholars have previously given their opinions about the problems and challenges faced by Chinese students and teachers in learning and teaching spoken English. However, most of these

studies have only given a brief summary without an actual validation process. Through interviews with front-line English teachers, this study provides insights into the real situation of spoken English teaching in the current compulsory education system in China, as well as the actual difficulties encountered by teachers and students.

The results of the study show that current spoken English teaching at the stage of compulsory education in China still faces many challenges. From the teachers' point of view, their own English proficiency, teaching skills and experience are affecting spoken English teaching. Due to the limitations of their English language skills, many teachers are unable to maximize their own role in spoken English teaching activities and the advantages of the teaching methods. Since there are many teachers who are inexperienced in teaching spoken English, and even some of them are not graduates of English majors, their English teaching skills may be limited. For the students, they have problems such as inaccurate pronunciation and not native expression. It is hard to establish a good language environment for students and cultivate their native linguistic logic under a traditional teaching mode in compulsory education, so such problems occur continually. However, such a teaching mode has existed for years, and the students and teachers under this education system are large in number, coupled with the limited funds and resources, it is difficult to change the situation and create a better language learning environment for students overnight. From the perspective of the education system, many teachers currently believe that a curriculum with little time and a lot of content is not conducive to richer teaching and learning activities, and is even less conducive to fostering students' interests. Besides, the over-emphasis on scores and entrance exams has also led to the neglect or even complete abandonment of oral English learning by students, teachers, schools and other parties. In addition to the above three aspects, the interviewees shared more. Difficulty in establishing a language environment, insufficient funds and resources, and lack of attention to after-class learning from parents are all factors that are affecting spoken English teaching in the compulsory education system.

However, there is also the positive side. For example, teachers' ideas of teaching are constantly developing, and teachers are more and more aware of the importance of appropriate teaching methods and have made practice and attempts to find better teaching methods. What's more, teachers have also realized the importance of encouraging students and cultivating interests.

This study investigates and summarizes the difficulties and obstacles encountered by English teachers and students in teaching and learning spoken English in China's compulsory education system, answering the research questions of this study. Such information helps teachers and researchers to recognize more clearly the current situation of spoken English education in China, which may help them to further improve their teaching methods, content of teaching, and even the education system itself, by consciously noticing the emergence of these problems and responding to them. However, this study did not go on to seek solutions to these difficulties. Therefore, in future research, it may be worthwhile to think of how to deal with these problems, change the current situation, and truly change the status quo of "dumb English" that Chinese students have in compulsory education.

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