

*TEACHING ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING*

*TO*

*NON-ENGLISH MAJORS IN CHINA*

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*TEACHING ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING  
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Liu Junli (Katherine)

The purpose of English teaching is to let students be able to use the language. If a student is good at English, he or she should be able to use the language both in listening and speaking. They are necessary for communication. But nowadays students can do well in reading and writing, but rather poor in listening and speaking.

This purpose of this paper is to provide a report on the importance of listening comprehension and speaking ability in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and to argue that more emphasis should be given to listening comprehension and speaking skills. The report includes significant research findings in second language acquisition and the relationship between listening comprehension and language learning. Research suggests that listening is prerequisite to other language skills, and listening should be the primary skill to be acquired in learning a new language. There are major reasons for applying the listening-first approach. Listening comprehension sets a foundation for the future acquisition of speaking. But a lot of learners can only say “My English is poor” after years of study. So, it’s urgent to put some emphasis on listening and speaking.

The paper is also a report on some teaching methods for listening and speaking in EFL learning. Teachers and students can apply these methods in teaching and learning, so that to fulfill the purpose of verbal communication.

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## Chapter I Introduction

College English is an obligatory course for non-English major students in Chinese colleges and universities. College students are required to take two-year English classes and pass corresponding proficiency tests, CET 4 and CET 6 in order to earn credits needed for a degree and to receive the certificates. Both exams are closely related to College English teaching and learning because of their tremendous social and practical function (Ruan Yihui, et al. 2009, 467). The exams are accepted as one of the stepping-stones on the road to employment. Employment candidates must have the certificates to obtain a position. In some larger metropolitan centers, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, top graduates cannot expect to secure a government position without first obtaining a CET4 or CET6 certificate (Chen, 2003, 49).

Both tests are focused on reading and writing. Thus, the teachers and students alike put emphasis on the two skills. As a result, students are rather poor in listening and speaking. They cannot speak English fluently or understand others in the daily conversations in English. Consequently, there appears to be a kind of phenomenon which is called “high score, low ability”. That means the students with a high score in reading and written English are “deaf” or “dumb” in spoken English (Liu Xiaoyuan, 2010).

The current state of college English teaching and learning for the two skills is far from satisfactory. First of all, the students are rather poor in English because of the expansion of college enrollment. Second, the current English teaching and learning methods are rather traditional; they are mainly test-oriented.

This paper is a report on teaching English listening and speaking to non-English majors in China. An analysis of some problems and the offering of some solutions to the problems are provided.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The problems to be addressed are the following: Why English proficiency is important in China? What methods are used in teaching English listening and speaking to non-English majors?

## **Definition of Terms**

The College English Test, better known as CET, is national English as a Foreign Language test in the People's Republic of China. This test is held nationally twice a year in June and December. The CET consists of the non-English specialized "Band 4"(CET4), and "Band 6" (CET6). The purpose of CET is to test Chinese college students (non-English majors) general English ability—listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing ability, but the spoken test is optional. (Zhang Jianjun, 2006)

Listening comprehension is one of the four skills in language learning. It aims to test the students' mastery of English and to test the students' ability in understanding daily communication in CET tests. It takes three forms: short and long conversations, passages and compound dictation.

Listening is also defined differently by different scholars.

Goss (1982) stated that listening is a process of taking what you hear and organizing it into verbal units to which you can apply meaning. Applied to speech processing, listening requires that a student structures the sounds that he/she heard and organizes them into words, phrases, sentences, or other linguistic units.

Brown and Yule (1983) explained listening as follows:

Listening comprehension could mean that a person understands what he or she has heard. However, in EFL teaching, it often is taken to mean that the listener can repeat the text, even though the listener may reproduce the sound without real comprehension (p. 58).

The Expansion of College Enrollment has been the plan to invigorate higher education in the mainland of People's Republic of China since 1999. Its purpose is to expand the enrollment of university students and postgraduate students. The plan originated from the document *Action Scheme for Invigorating Education Towards the 21st Century* issued by the Ministry of Education in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999).

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of the literature related to the theory, research and application of English teaching is to be conducted. The importance of listening and speaking will be put forward in the beginning, and then the current teaching situation of listening and speaking to non-English majors in China will be demonstrated. Finally, some suggestions and solutions will be offered to solve the problems.

The paper will be completed by searching for books and articles from the Karmann Library of University of Wisconsin Platteville. Some searching tools such as ERIC, Wilson, and EBSCO will be used to find the information. In addition, the online sources of library of South-Central University for Nationalities will also be used to find some relative books and articles in both Chinese and English. Furthermore, the online search tool such as Google will also be helpful for some research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### **The Importance and Needs of Teaching English Listening and Speaking**

Listening and speaking, as the most important and difficult basic skills in learning a foreign language, is the way to acquire linguistic competency and to communicate effectively. However, this remains a major obstacle for foreign language teaching, especially for non-English majors. Listening should be the first and foremost skill to be acquired in learning a new language. Understanding spoken words is a prerequisite to speaking, reading, and writing. The most basic is the ability to understand others so as to achieve verbal communication. Therefore, for English learners, listening comprehension ability is critical in the English communicative ability (Wang Xin, 2008). According to research, listening accounts for 45% in daily speech and speaking 30%, while 16% and 9% for reading and writing respectively. The importance of listening can be seen from these figures. Spoken communication can be achieved only after one can understand what others are talking about. English learners should be aware of the needs for the cultivation of the two skills.

Modernization and China's economic and social development have spurred nationwide English language fever. Tian K. (2002) observed that since China's opening-up policy in the 80s, international communication becomes increasingly frequent between China and other countries. Therefore, more people are becoming aware that language is one of the great barriers to international interaction. Individuals with high English proficiency are widely sought in every field, especially those with a good mastery of speaking ability. China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001 has intensified the needs for the demand for language proficiency. Moreover, with China's successful bidding and hosting of the Olympic Games, more foreigners flocked to China, the Chinese people have seen the practical importance of oral English.

As a result, students also feel a need for greater proficiency in English. Dissatisfaction with the college English teaching is viewed in the labor market as well as by the students (Ruan, 2009, p 469). Studies have found that most students are not content with their English abilities. They are “deaf” or “dumb” in actual communication. They cannot understand others and they cannot fluently and properly express themselves in certain situations in international exchange. In summary, it is clear to see the urgency to teach English listening and speaking to the Non-English majors.

### **The Current Teaching Situation of Non-English Major Students in China and Existing Problems**

Because of the importance of English in people’s lives, more attention has been paid to the teaching of College English. But the current teaching of English is far from satisfactory. It can be seen from the following aspects.

First of all, the reading-centered subject curriculum cannot satisfy a student’s integrated English--language competence requirements (Liu Xiaoyuan, 2010, p 163). The college English teaching syllabus and College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) have indicated clearly that the goal of College English Teaching is to cultivate a student’s integrated English competence, especially listening and speaking abilities, so a student can achieve effective spoken and written communication in English in his or her future life and social interaction. At the same time, they require their graduates to enhance their self-learning ability and comprehensive cultural quality so as to satisfy the needs of economic development and international communication. But nowadays, Chinese colleges and universities attach more importance to intensive reading and the explanation of the intensive course accounts for almost 80% of the total syllabus. Teachers spend most of the time on the explanation of grammar and vocabulary and the

analysis of the text structure; very little attention is given to listening and speaking ability and pragmatic competence training. Even though teachers are aware of the importance of cultivating a student's listening and speaking abilities, they are helpless due to limited time in class. As a result, the non-English majors are rather poor in the two aspects and their integrated competence requirements can not be met.

A second problem deals with the current college English tests band 4 and band 6 (CET 4 and CET 6) which make it hard to reach the ideal teaching effect. Although there is some reformation in both tests with an increase in the percentage of listening comprehension from 20% to 35%, the test does include much emphasis on reading, writing and translation. The Oral test is available only when the students get a high score in CET 4 and CET 6 and the spoken test is voluntary, not being a rigid requirement. Besides, many universities still put the pass rate of both tests, especially band 4, as a criterion of English teaching. Furthermore, the students will not obtain their graduation certificate if they don't pass CET 4. Therefore, students are rather passive in the test-based learning pattern and they regard learning English as a way to deal with tests, not to improve their spoken abilities. Some students desire to practice their oral and practical English, but they finally give up due to limited time and the tests. Even if the students have passed both tests, their practical English ability did not improve at all. They can read and write, but they cannot express themselves orally.

A third problem is that most English classes are teacher-centered, the teachers speak most of the time, and they try to explain everything in great detail because they think the more they teach, the more the students will get. Thus, little interaction is achieved during the class meetings and students are rather passive. They are busy taking notes and memorizing what the teacher has taught. Thus, students lack exercise in listening and speaking abilities, and they will eventually

lose interest in English.

The fourth problem concerns class size. Classes are rather big with more than 60 students thanks to the expansion of college enrollment. Consequently, the numbers of college English teachers can't satisfy the numbers of students in a large scale. With the increase in the number of students, a teacher's workload increases correspondingly, and many teachers work more than 20 hours a week. The teachers are generally busy preparing for classes and checking student assignments that they rarely have enough time to reflect on their teaching (Li Zhang, 2008). This greatly influences the effect of teaching. On the other hand, the teachers can't ask every student to speak in class but rather they ask the whole class or only several of them to answer the questions or have oral response in class. This greatly reduces the opportunities for most of them to practice in class in English.

Finally, the non-English major students are rather poor in English. They have a small vocabulary and a poor mastery of grammar. They learned pronunciation in middle school, but they do not have a systematic study of the knowledge of phonetics, so they can't distinguish the weak stress of some sounds and the pronunciation of some similar sounds in listening comprehension, let alone to fluently express themselves orally.

### **Transformation of College English Teaching**

In order to satisfy the social and practical functions of English, some transformation is needed in the teaching of college English.

#### 1. Transformation of English syllabus:

Universities should break the traditional intensive-centered class setting and add some listening and speaking classes (Liu Xiaoyuan, 2010, 164). Students would have more opportunities to practice their listening and spoken ability with the increased percentage of

listening and speaking classes. The focus on the classroom teaching and learning transfers from reading and writing to their communicative competence, that is, listening and speaking.

2. Transformation of the class size:

Universities control the size of the class and teachers take full advantage of the modern network resources to improve classroom mechanics (Hu Bing, 2007, 103). The setting of the classrooms should be smaller, so more students can take an active part in the class and will have more opportunities to correspond to the teachers. Thus, they would improve their listening and speaking abilities unconsciously. Besides, the introduction of vivid and interesting multimedia resources brings more resources in the classrooms and it will arouse students' interest in English. It will benefit both the students and the teachers.

3. Transformation of teaching methods:

Students are frustrated with listening and speaking and cannot improve their competence of listening and speaking because of the lack of the skills. The teaching methods in most universities are rather traditional, and they are teacher-centered, with the teacher speaking most of the time and students listening to the teacher passively. This teaching approach makes the classroom dull. Universities should try to adopt the students-centered way of teaching, or cooperative teaching, by dividing the class into several small groups, so each student will have the opportunity to speak.

### **Teaching of Listening and Speaking**

The teaching of Listening:

First of all, English teachers should vigorously promote the English foundation to build a learning atmosphere (Li Jian, 2010, 210). In order to achieve this purpose, teachers should correct student pronunciation when the freshmen have their very first listening class. Teachers

make the students have a general knowledge of the basic skills, such as, pronunciation, intonation, stress, speed, etc. and practice them. So the students must learn to read aloud single words, and imitate the pronunciation of Standard English. In the reading process, they pay attention to the special phenomenon, such as reading, liaison and blasting sound, stress transfer, assimilation, etc. to develop a sense of language. Once students have mastered the basic rules of pronunciation, they can notice the differences of some sounds and can make a correct judgment for themselves in listening comprehension. In addition, teachers can direct students to distinguish the differences between British pronunciation and American pronunciation.

In the second place, a student's vocabulary and mastery of grammar should be enlarged (Li Zhang, 2008). According to Ashmore, R. A., vocabulary is the words one must know to communicate effectively. Lack of vocabulary is not only an obstacle for reading comprehension, but also the main difficulty in listening comprehension. Readers cannot understand what they are reading or listening to without knowing what most of the words mean (2003, p. 30). Some students have a large vocabulary, but they still cannot get the exact meaning of the listening material. This is because they lack the ability of practical application of the words. Some students know the exact meaning of each single word, but when they come together to form an idiom or a phrase, they just can't figure them out. Thus, students have to know the ways to memorize new words, such as, the root, the suffix, the prefix, antonyms and synonyms, and so on to enlarge their vocabulary.

In the third place, teachers try to cultivate a student's leaning motivation and encourage his or her confidence in listening (Zou Xinxin. 2003). Students lack the motivation because of several reasons. On the one hand, the students are not cooperative. They are afraid of listening, so they refuse to attend class, and they don't finish their assignments on time. When they

actually come to attend class, they cannot concentrate on their study and they regard listening to English as a hard job. Once they meet some difficulties they will lose their confidence and finally give up. On the other hand, the teachers should be blamed because they didn't tell the students the characteristics of listening and the correct methods to listen. They didn't teach with the effective methods. Besides, some listening materials are boring and they don't have any practical connection with our real life, so the students don't have a strong motivation to listen to them. The teachers should use the incentive mechanism to create a harmonious teaching atmosphere to make the students experience the successful development of happiness. When students do well, timely praise should be offered, and when they do not do well, teachers encourage them to try harder.

A fourth aspect of this problem is that teachers don't provide abundant listening materials and they don't set appropriate listening goals. Yang Xuqin stated in 2010 that if students have a strong desire to learn, they cannot transfer their needs into motivation without rich listening material (p. 109). In addition to provide the required listening materials, teachers can recommend students to listen to English songs, to enjoy English movies, listen to the English news such as VOA and BBC, and they can listen to Crazy English which is popular in China. Besides, they can also visit the websites to listen online in the modern internet age. Rich listening materials will greatly arouse students' motivation in the long run.

The teaching of Speaking:

1. Spoken English is rather hard for English majors, and even harder for non-English majors. Non-English majors confront some psychological obstacles when speaking English in public. They are afraid of making mistakes in class and they are afraid of being criticized by teachers and being laughed at by their fellow classmates (Li Yunxia, 2008). This kind of fear

often leads to anxiety and stress that will affect their normal thinking and smooth expression. Generally, the students can be divided into two types. In one group, they are born shy and they are ashamed to speak their native language, let alone English in public. In the other group, they feel that it is embarrassing to speak English and they are afraid of speaking "Chinglish" due to their incorrect pronunciation and limited number of vocabulary. In this case, the teachers can go back to being listeners, and to listening extensively to the free expression of students. Li Yunxia (2008) also suggested that teachers should tolerate appropriate mistakes because the main aim of oral language classes is to guide students through a series of language activities, to learn to express ideas with the target language so as to achieve communication. She asserted that teachers should focus on a student's ability to use language instead of on their accumulation of grammar knowledge. That is to say, in an oral English class, language fluency is first, and accuracy is secondary. If students can use the target language to clearly express their thought, the task of communication is finished. If a student's desire to speak English is aroused, he or she will not feel nervous and anxious in an oral English class and he or she will feel relaxed and eager to engage in oral activities.

2. A relaxed English spoken environment is essential to the students. This kind of environment should have three characteristics: a teacher's guidance, good conducive environment and the role that each student plays (Peng Caixia, 2008). Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to create a students-centered atmosphere to practice. In order to achieve this purpose, cooperative learning should be adopted. Thus instructor needs to divide the class into several small groups and should assign each group a topic or a setting closely related to the students' life, and each student picks up a role to play such as, the time keeper, the recorder, and the reporter, and the team leader. Each student contributes to the group work and they speak

freely within the group. If they make mistakes, they will not feel as shy as if participating with the whole class. After the reporter reports the group work to the whole class, the teacher makes some comments on them. If they have done a good job, the team members feel encouraged to do better in the future, but if they did not do well, there is room for them to make progress. This cooperative learning benefits the teacher and students greatly with students talking most of the time with the teacher talking less. Thus, the center of activity transfers from the teacher to the students.

Besides classroom learning, there are also other places to practice spoken English. Many Chinese universities have English corners, salons, radio programs, activities, concerts, and so on. The various activities provide a lot of opportunities for the learners to practice English.

In addition, there are foreign teachers from English-speaking countries in many universities. Students have opportunities to communicate with them in English. They can learn English intonation and pronunciation from them. Students can improve their English accuracy and proficiency by talking with the foreign teachers.

3. Teaching spoken English should also pay attention to cross-cultural communication content. Claire Kramsch stated in the book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* that mastering a language is not confined to learning the language itself. In the learning of a language, the cultural knowledge of the target language is not only an important aspect to cultivate communicative ability, but also one of the requirements of education. The mission of the foreign-language teaching is to develop fluent communication between people with different cultural backgrounds (2001).

But English teaching in China ignores the teaching of social and cultural factors, so students

lack understanding of the cultural differences between Chinese and western culture. In oral English teaching, the teacher should attach equal importance to pragmatic competence and language ability and combine the language forms and cultural content. The teacher should also closely combine listening and speaking to help students study the daily routine conversations to help grasp the conversational rules and to learn culture.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the review of existing literature related to Teaching English Listening and Speaking to Non-English Majors in China, the following conclusion can be drawn. The non-English major students are generally poor in listening and speaking, and their English competence varies greatly, but the college teachers should, first of all, not be discouraged, but to believe in the potential of the students. They could do well as long as they have opportunities. The teachers try to guide and cultivate student abilities in English and often check what they have learned. Besides, the teachers often change teaching methods in different conditions and periods to achieve the best result. With the appropriate guidance, a student's active involvement, and after the mastery of reading and writing, the non-English majors will acquire the ability of listening and speaking in order to really master the language.

Based on these conclusions and findings, it is recommended that students practice their listening and speaking because practice makes perfect. They should practice the two skills together for they are a whole. They can also read many books and magazines to keep up with the modern world so they may have more topics for their oral communication. Teachers need to pay more attention to the practical communication function of English and not just the single pass rate of the CET 4 and CET 6.

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## Appendix A

### Basic Requirements for Primary English Teaching (Experimental version)

Ministry of Education, 2001

Globalization has made foreign languages, especially English, an important tool in China's reform and opening-up with the international community. Recently, English has been offered at more primary schools and areas, and research findings have supported its benefits. In order to fully implement quality education and to enhance the quality of the whole nation in the 21st century, the MOE has actively mandated English in primary schools. Basic Requirements for Primary English Teaching (Experimental version) is the basis for implementation and evaluation of primary English instruction and for the examination and selection of course books.

#### *I. Goals of the course:*

With recognition to age and psychological characteristics, the goals for primary English courses are to stimulate a child's interest in and positive attitude toward learning English in order to develop confidence and a sense of speech, and to lay the foundation of phonetics for further English study.

#### *II. Starting grade and schedule:*

Primary English is offered from grade 3. In order to guarantee the quality of instruction, the teaching program must combine regular and shorter lesson spans with high frequency. A minimum of four classes per week is required with shorter durations for grades 3 and 4; a combination of regular and shorter lessons is required for grades 5 and 6, including at least two regular lessons per week.

#### *III. Instructional goals and standards:*

According to College English Curriculum Requirements published by Ministry of Education

of the People's Republic of China in 2007, there are two levels of standards for the primary English curriculum. Level 1 applies to grades 3 and 4; level 2 applies to grades 5 and 6. As the conditions for English education vary in different areas, with the approval of the provincial education administration, a modified level 2 standard, higher or lower, may be implemented.

Level 1 student outcomes are as follows:

Listening and doing:

1. To identify pictures or objects according to the words heard.
2. To respond correctly to classroom instructions.
3. To act according to the instructions, for example, point to pictures, color, draw, or act.
4. To understand simple stories with visual prompts and respond.

Speaking and singing:

1. To listen to a recording and imitate.
2. To greet each other.
3. To exchange simple personal information, such as names and ages.
4. To express simple feelings, such as likes and dislikes.
5. To guess and speak mimed actions.
6. To sing 15-20 simple English songs and 15-20 chants.
7. To say words or short sentences accompanying pictures.

Playing and performing:

1. To play games in English and communicate in English while playing.
2. To role play.
3. To perform English songs and fairy tales.

Reading and writing:

1. To use visual aids, write the word.
2. To read aloud the learned words.
3. To read and comprehend simple stories with pictures.
4. To correctly print words and sentences.

Viewing and listening:

1. To understand simple English cartoons and teaching programs (minimal audiovisual practice time is 10 hours per school year or 20-25 minutes per week).

Level 2 student outcomes are:

Listening:

1. To understand slow but natural speech or audiotape with the prompt of pictures and gestures.
2. To understand simple stories with illustrations.
3. To understand simple questions in class activities.
4. To understand common directions and requests and respond appropriately.

Speaking:

1. To speak English with clear pronunciation, correct stress, and expressive intonation.
2. To make simple dialogues about a familiar person and family.
3. To properly use the basic daily pattern, such as greetings, farewell, gratitude, and apologies.
4. To tell short stories with the teacher's help.

Reading:

1. To pronounce the learned words.
2. To spell simple words according to the spelling rules.
3. To understand the simple directions and requests in the textbooks.
4. To understand the simple message on greeting cards.

5. To understand simple stories and passages with pictures and read in groups.
6. To read aloud the learned texts or stories correctly.

Writing:

1. To write simple titles or descriptions for pictures or objects.
2. To write sentences after the models.
3. To write simple greetings.
4. To punctuate correctly.

Playing and performing:

1. To play games in English.
2. To act out short stories or fairy tales with the teacher's help.
3. To perform 30-40 chants and rhymes (including those in level 1).
4. To sing 30-40 English songs.

Viewing and listening:

1. To understand simple English cartoons and teaching programs that parallel the learned text (minimal audiovisual practice time is 10 hours per school year or 20-25 minutes per week).