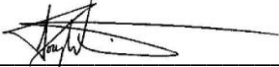


ANALYZING COLLEGE NON-ENGLISH MAJOR LEARNERS' COMMUNICATIVE  
COMPETENCE IN THE ORAL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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By

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Kory Wein

It is generally agreed by scholars that the goal of teaching language is to help students acquire the ability to use language in real practice. In this regard, oral English proficiency is an indispensable part of college English teaching. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the current situation of college oral English teaching and propound suggestions. The problem to be addressed is, "To what extent does communicative competence affect Chinese college non-English major students' oral English proficiency in the classroom?"

The paper consists of three parts—Introduction, Literature Review, and Conclusions and Recommendations. It focuses on teaching methods used in college oral English classes and tries to analyze to what extent students' communicative competence can be improved under such circumstances.

*Keywords: College English teaching method; Communicative competence; Non-English major students; Oral English proficiency*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Most research indicates that college English teaching in China focuses mainly on reading, writing, grammar, translation, and memorization of vocabulary. College English classes are dominated by the traditional grammar-translation method and have failed to develop an adequate level of communicative competence (Siemon, 2010). Thus, the reading and writing skills of Chinese students are much higher than their oral skills. However, with the promotion and popularization of CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET-6 (College English Test Band 6), there has been greater attention placed on listening activities. For a long time, the primary reason to practice listening was to prepare students for examinations. Consequently, students spend lots of time learning rules of grammar and memorizing phrases and vocabulary words. It turns out that most Chinese college students are “not proficient in using the vocabulary appropriately or applying the grammar rules, either in general communication or in written work” (Siemon, 2010, p. 41).

The ultimate goal of language acquisition is to have “meaningful interaction in the target language—natural communication—in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the message they are conveying and understanding” (Krashen, 2007). Hence, developing English language learners’ communicative competence is the focal point of language teaching, and it is critical to learners’ future development.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed is, “To what extent does communicative competence affect Chinese college non-English major students’ oral English proficiency in classroom?”

## **Definition of Terms**

*Grammatical competence*: the knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology (Chomsky, 1965).

*Sociolinguistic competence*: a language user's knowledge about the culture where the actual communication occurs (Canale & Swain, 1980).

*Discourse competence*: one's ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them (Canale & Swain, 1980).

*Strategic competence*: "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.30).

## **Method of Approach**

All research was conducted through the Elton S. Karrmann Library at UW-Platteville using the EBSCOHOST database and through South-Central University for Nationalities Library using the CNKI database. The search terms were limited to "communicative competence," "Chinese college non-English," and "oral English proficiency."

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

### Status Quo of College Oral English Teaching in China

Rooted in traditional teaching methods, college English teaching in China mainly focuses on delivering language knowledge and passing examinations. In addition, many employers require CET-4 and CET-6 certification, which do not require passing an oral English test. Under such circumstances, college students spend less time improving their oral English; thus, the oral English proficiency of non-English major students is generally low (Zhang & Luo, 2004). Students' low oral English proficiency can be analyzed from two perspectives: the student's perspective and the teacher's perspective.

#### *The student's perspective*

Because students play a central role in the language learning process, it is necessary to observe common phenomena among Chinese college students and their attitudes toward learning oral English.

According to a research conducted by Liu and Jackson (2009) in a major university in Beijing, reticence is regarded as a serious and common phenomenon existing in all levels of English classes in institutions in Mainland China. Reticence is a "complicated phenomenon in target-language medium classrooms, as it is provoked by a complex set of cultural, linguistic, psychological, and social factors" (Jackson, 2003, p.67). In their study, Liu and Jackson (2009) note that most of the participants showed a strong willingness to speak English, and the more proficient the participants were the more willing they were to practice oral English in class. In terms of classroom activities, students preferred paired work to presentations. However, the most reticent students hardly made contributions during paired work. An interesting phenomenon is that some reticent students claimed that they were active because they were "listening" to their



partners. Students proficient in English and extroverted were more active in class than those whose English was poor (Yang, 2006). The majority of students were unconfident with their oral English and afraid of making mistakes in speaking and of being laughed at by fellow students. As a result, potential fears bring about anxiety and nervousness, which affect students' normal pattern of thinking and fluent expression.

English is a second language in China, unlike Singapore, Malaysia and India, where English is the official language. Without full exposure to English, college students have little chance to practice oral English. Furthermore, a normal English class in college comprises about 40 to 50 students (Cai, 2002). Therefore, many non-English major learners get very little practice using English.

#### *The teacher's perspective*

Concerned about the passing rate on the college English test (CET), English teachers attach great importance to vocabulary and language knowledge acquired from textbooks (Deng, 2006). Consequently, students cannot orally express themselves with proper English, though they have large vocabularies. Additionally, some college English teachers overlook or disregard intercultural knowledge in teaching. In real talk, students cannot understand native speakers or accurately express their intention. In general, the above phenomena are closely related to teacher cognition. In their case study of teacher cognition, Li and Shi (2011) wrote, "Findings suggest that teachers do have a complex system of cognition about OET (oral English teaching) that is sometimes not reflected in their classroom practice for various complicated reasons, some directly related to the nature of oral English teaching in particular, and some related to the context and social political environment of teaching" (2011, p. 32). In this sense, what teachers believe about oral English teaching is another important factor that influences the outcome of

classroom practice.

## **Understanding of Communicative Competence Theories**

### *Chomsky's theory*

According to Avram Noam Chomsky (1965), one of the fathers of modern linguistics, *competence* is a language user's underlying knowledge about the system of rules, and *performance* is the actual use of language. In Chomsky's view, this system of knowledge makes it possible for speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language, and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. Chomsky discussed an ideal language user who has the ability to produce and understand an infinitely large number of sentences in an idealized homogeneous speech community. Hymes (1971) believed that what Chomsky meant by *competence* is grammatical knowledge. Chomsky (2006) holds that "Extralinguistic beliefs concerning the speaker and the situation play a fundamental role in determining how speech is produced, identified and understood" (p. 102). That is to say, elements beyond linguistics (for example, the situation of a conversation or the knowledge of audiences) influence delivery of the speech. Furthermore, Chomsky points out that the principles of cognitive structure control the linguistic performance. He believes that principles of cognitive structure are out of the scope of language. Therefore, in Chomsky's view, performance is observable behavior revealed by a language user in an actual communicative process.

### *Hymes' theory*

In response to Chomsky's abstract linguistic competence, Hymes' own study focused on the actual performance of language with the aim of studying the various ways of speaking on the part of the individual and the community (Hedge, 2002). As a sociolinguist, Hymes was concerned with social and cultural knowledge, which speakers need in order to understand and

use linguistic forms (Hedge, 2002). He coined the term *communicative competence* within language education. In Hymes' (1979) words, there are "rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p.15), which means that besides grammatical rules, practical language use is governed by rules of use. In other words, communicative competence entails not only the abstract knowledge of language but also when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner. In his paper "On Communicative Competence," Hymes (1971) first put forward four sectors of communicative competence:

1. Whether (and to what extent) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what extent) something is feasible;
3. Whether (and to what extent) something is appropriate;
4. Whether (and to what extent) something is done (p. 5-26).

The first element is roughly equivalent to Chomsky's restricted notion of competence as grammaticality. It is concerned with whether a language permits a structure as grammatical (possible) or rejects it as ungrammatical (impossible). That is to say, whether a sentence is correct or not in one language is judged by the grammatical rules of the language (Brumfit & Johnson, 1971). For example, in English a sentence is composed of Subject + Verb + Objective; however, a Korean sentence is created in the order of Subject + Objective + Verb. Each language has its own rules that a language learner must follow. The second element deals with feasibility. Although a sentence may be correct in grammar, it can be meaningless or unacceptable. The third element is concerned with appropriateness. Hymes (1971) held that appropriateness is hard to address from the perspective of linguistic theory. A sentence can be grammatically feasible but inappropriate due to a speaker endowed with competence of "rules of appropriateness." For example, speaker A is sad about losing her cat. Speaker B told speaker A that she hates the cat

because it makes the house messy. In this case, speaker A will definitely think speaker B's language is inappropriate; however, there are no grammatical errors. The final element covers the area of usage. A sentence may meet requirements of the above three elements, but it may not be used in reality.

Hymes (1971) concluded that "the goal of a broad theory of competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systemically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behavior" (p. 23-24). In other words, *competence* is an umbrella term that refers to the way of presenting daily communication.

#### *Canale and Swain's theory*

Canale and Swain (1980) defined *communicative competence* in terms of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. They asserted that these four elements are correlated but relatively independent, and all elements are important and indispensable to successful communication.

First, grammatical competence is roughly equal to what Chomsky means by *linguistic competence* and Hymes' "whether something is possible" (p. 5). It refers to the knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology. Secondly, sociolinguistic competence deals with a language user's knowledge about the culture where the actual communication occurs. It is simply a fact that sociolinguistic competence seems to be more useful than grammatical competence in a specific communication where people are more likely to accept grammar error than pragmatic failure (e.g., culture shock). Thirdly, according to Canale and Swain, discourse competence refers to one's ability to create coherent written text or conversation and the ability to understand them. In other words, it is one's ability to logically and coherently develop and understand a conversation by effectively employing

words. Lastly, Canale and Swain defined strategic competence as “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (p. 30). For example, if you forgot how to say “cell phone,” you can use gestures to show what you mean or you can explain it by saying that one can use this device to talk to another regardless of long distance.

### **Application of Communicative Competence Theories in China**

According to Tao, Yu & Jin (2011), Hymes’s theory is incomplete. Canale and Swain developed Hymes’ theory further. Influenced by structural linguistics, they gradually developed “Communicative Language Teaching based on a sound theoretical basis, aiming at the cultivation of the communicative competence of language learners” (p. 690). To analyze the outcome of current college English teaching in China, especially learners’ English proficiency, Canale and Swain’s (1980) theories can be used as criteria.

#### *(1) Grammar-Translation Method*

For many years, the grammar-translation method has played a dominant role in English teaching. A great number of college English teachers are still adopting this method because Chinese students have become accustomed to this method. Some students even show great interest in linguistics. From this point of view, the advantage of grammar-translation method in foreign language teaching cannot be ignored. However, the outcome of students’ English competence is not as good as expected. Students frequently make grammatical mistakes both in writing and speaking. This reality has shown us that teacher-centered methods do not have students put into practice the linguistic knowledge that they have learned in class. Moreover, learners rarely participate in the discussion or language practice; accordingly their sociolinguistic

competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence are dissatisfactory. According to Ye Jin (2007), “a grammar-oriented approach reflects an artificial and formalistic view of language skills and learning. It doesn’t allow the learners to use a language in a natural way” (p. 30). In general, the grammar-translation method does not emphasize the communicative function of English as a language. As Tao, Yu & Jin note, “Teachers mostly believe that students are able to learn to communicate, and students can be communicative through accumulating grammar knowledge and vocabulary when such accumulation arrives at a boiling point” (2011, p. 691).

## *(2) Direct Method*

This teaching method asserts that language can be acquired through repetition and imitation. It helps learners to develop English proficiency by using the target language in possible occasions, such as dialogue, chatting and reading, instead of using one’s mother tongue. The purpose of the direct teaching method is to have students directly connect the target language with substances of the world without the medium-mother tongue. This teaching method can arouse students’ interest in the primary phase of study, and it contributes to improving students’ discourse competence. Nevertheless, its advantages are gradually undermined with increased difficulty level. In the first place, direct methods are helpless for constructing grammatical competence. Teachers use the target language throughout the class and aim to let students accumulate actual language materials and then summarize rules of grammar from these language materials. For this reason, it is hard for learners to fully grasp the rules of grammar, which is the basis for further study. In the second place, direct methods are opposed to using one’s mother tongue. It is generally agreed that one’s mother tongue can facilitate learners’ comprehension during learning a language. Lastly, direct methods are most suitable for English beginners and small class sizes. This method is effective at the initial stage of teaching in order to eliminate

learners' shyness and to encourage them to speak freely.

### *(3) Audio-lingual Approach*

As the name suggests, this teaching method emphasizes listening and speaking. It requires learners to listen to the authentic materials with sentences as the smallest units and then repeat it until one can memorize it. In other words, learners are totally exposed to the correct form of the target language. And free talk is not allowed in such teaching method in order to avoid ungrammatical use of the target language. Consequently, students hardly can express their own ideas through practice, which impedes the development of strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence.

However, in the practical applications of a language, grammatical error is more likely accepted than pragmatic failure. "Those working in the field of applied linguistics have consistently pointed out that violations of sociolinguistic rules may actually cause more trouble for communication than grammatical errors" (Blyth, 2000, p. 554). In addition, this method overemphasizes mechanical practices that decrease learners' enthusiasm of learning language.

The audio-lingual approach is beneficial for learners in that they acquire authentic knowledge about the target language, but it prevents learners from taking part in meaningful communication and practicing communication skills.

### *(4) Communicative Language Teaching Approach*

The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach was introduced to China in the early 1990s. The major principle of this approach is that "both learning and teaching are to cultivate students' communicative ability by using English as a tool for communication" (Tao, Yu & Jin, 2011, p. 691). This method suggests that teaching goals and plans should be formulated according to the learners' needs (Do, 2006). Teachers no longer impart knowledge unilaterally,

and students no longer blindly receive knowledge. In essence, teaching activities focus on two aspects. Firstly, communicative activities are similar to real-life situations. For example, learners perform episodes that have happened in their lives, or students can role play (e.g., imitate a doctor and patient to practice useful expressions in English). Secondly, significant tasks are helpful to have students practice the target language and deal with unexpected occurrences during the task. In this regard, CLT can be effective only when both teachers and students do sufficient preparation before conducting tasks. Generally speaking, the feature of CLT reflects four competences as presented by Canale and Swain (1980). In the task preparation stage, students need to collect materials and arrange them. In this process, students can improve grammatical competence by group discussion or from the teacher's help. The other three competences can be developed through performing tasks. For instance, there may have been some unexpected situations during the task, but students have to deal with them by themselves in order to accomplish the task. Such situations provide learners opportunities to practice strategic competence.

However, there are some obstacles to adopt CLT in China. Firstly, large class sizes prevent teachers from conducting CLT well. Moreover, there are usually only 45 minutes in an English class. Therefore, ensuring that each student has enough opportunities to practice oral English is difficult. Secondly, English teachers with a fairly high level of communicative competence are required in China. Many college English teachers in China have been used to traditional teaching methods and have lost enthusiasm to adopt a new teaching approach (Campbell & Zhao, 1993). Finally, teaching material is another problem. The consistent update of teaching materials is necessary to complement learners and teachers. Nevertheless, "Right now, some universities in China stick to their own textbooks—*College English*, which was published in 1989 by Shanghai



Foreign Language Education Press, and has remained unchanged for more than 10 years” (Ye, 2007, p. 31).

### **CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the review of existing literature related to college non-English major learners' communicative competence in oral English classroom, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Many Chinese English educators' research shows that Chinese students are accustomed to input style of teaching, such as the grammar-translation method, which can be attributed to the impact of the Chinese traditional teaching method. Nevertheless, unlike other subjects, language learning requires lengthy periods of practice, an appropriate study environment, and proper instruction. Hence, an effective teaching method should be applied to help students improve their communicative competence.

The above-mentioned four teaching methods all have advantages and limitations. Teachers can integrate these methods in their teaching process. For instance, audio-lingual method and direct method can be applied at the initial stage aims to inspire students' interest in learning English. As student's vocabulary capacity increased, communicative language teaching can be used to assist learners' participation in meaningful communicative activities. In addition, Zhou, Sheng & Han (2006) assert that teaching students communicative strategy and helping them increase vocabulary size are effective ways to improve learners' oral English communicative competence.

Ye (2007) put forward some factors that need to be considered when adopting communicative language teaching in China. First of all, accuracy and fluency should be combined. At the beginning level, teachers should use the grammar-translation method more in order to help learners build a solid foundation of English and at the same time guarantee accuracy. After students are able to manage language forms, teachers should pay more attention to intensive fluency practice. During the practice, teachers should not interrupt students but

correct them at the end of the fluency practice. Secondly, teaching should be student-centered. Ye (2007) wrote, “Teachers must ensure that classroom interactions are managed, not just by the teacher, but by all participants” (p.32). Ye recommends arranging classroom desks in a way that students can directly look at others and create interactions. Thirdly, teacher’s role in the communicative language teaching is still important. According to Han, “it is still the teacher’s responsibility to recognize the distinctive qualities in the students ” (as cited in Ye, 2007, p.32). Lastly, because many students who have passed CET-4 or CET-6 with a high score are unable to communicate in English, English tests in China should have an oral component and a language-use section (Tao, Yu & Jin, 2011).

In conclusion, there is no perfect teaching method to improve learners’ oral English, but combining different teaching methods at different stages of learning can greatly improve language acquisition. Moreover, a learner’s unremitting effort in oral English practice is most important.

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