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Spoken English Obstacles Confronted by Chinese Non-English Major College Students

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Abstract

This study surveyed 30 non-English majors in Jiangxi University of Engineering, based on Swain's output hypothesis, Krashen's input hypothesis, and Nattinger and Decarrico's language block theory, aiming to explore the specific manifestations and causes of spoken English obstacles among non-English majors. In this study, the data were collected by questionnaire survey and analyzed by SPSS23.0 software. It is found that the spoken English obstacles of non-English majors mainly include two categories: verbal obstacles and non-verbal obstacles. The causes of them are accounted from subjective and objective aspects. Subjective factors include students' anxiety, timidity, insufficient knowledge level, and poor learning methods and habits. Objective factors include lacks of cultural background knowledge, authentic language environment and teachers' professional quality.

Keywords: Spoken English, Non-English Majors, Obstacles, College Students, Factors of Spoken English Obstacles

Introduction

Spoken language usually refers to the speaker's expression or statement to others, mainly in the form of speech, explanation, report, speech (Zhong & Zuo, 2001). The most important feature of spoken language is its interactivity, which is related to social activities. It is generally unplanned and prepared according to the specific situations and occasions of communication. Spoken obstacles refer to the inability to successfully complete oral expression due to unclear thinking, lack of language vocabulary and poor ability to organize language. Therefore, the smooth progress of spoken language output needs to go through several links. First of all, people need to clear their mind and figure out how to express themselves. Secondly, rich and abundant language vocabulary is needed to pave the way for choosing appropriate expressions. Finally, they integrate their thoughts and language, and express what they want to say through continuous thinking.

Affected by various factors, students show no confidence and anxiety on oral English learning in China, which ultimately leads to unsatisfactory results in oral English communication. Shi (2017); Lin (2017) stated that Chinese students' spoken English obstacles were mainly manifested in two aspects: on the one hand, language obstacles, such as weak grammar foundation and little vocabulary, non-standard English pronunciation; on the other hand, non-linguistic obstacles, including the influences of adverse emotional factors (such as anxiety, nervousness, timidity) and environment. These factors will directly affect students' oral English output.

Although English as a compulsory course is conducted throughout all school stages in China, the students' anxiety about their speaking communication ability hinders the improvement of the skills. Scholars (Ehrman, 2003; Dornyei & Skehan, 2005; DeAngles, 2015) have discussed the obstacles that students encountered in spoken English learning from multiple perspectives and fields. They generally paid attention to the influence of emotional factors of affecting students' spoken English learning, and there are few relevant literature on how students overcome the obstacles in oral English learning. In this way, it is particularly important to cultivate students' oral communication ability in English. Lots of researches have been done in primary and secondary students in China (Bao, 2014; Li, 2012), researches involved in college students, especially the non-English majors' ones are rare.

On the basis of previous studies, this study aims to investigate the spoken English obstacles confronted by non-English major Chinese college students, and select its empirical subjects from Jiangxi University of Engineering. Two research objectives were formulated to guide the study:

- 1) to investigate the spoken English obstacles confronted by non-English major college students;
- 2) to illustrate the factors of non-English major college students' spoken English obstacles.

This study is of practical significance to improve college students' oral English competence. In addition, there are still many problems in oral English teaching in China, which are influenced by many reasons, including teachers' teaching mode, teaching philosophy and teaching methods. All these will have a significant impact on teachers' teaching effect. The results of this study will provide the strategies of teaching the spoken English among non-English majors from the two dimensions of teachers and students.

Literature Review

Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on factors that affect language learning, such as emotional factors, individual differences, and environment. After Horwitz (1986) proposed the concept of "foreign language learning anxiety", many researchers found negative foreign language learning emotions hindered the learning process, so they began to focus on the use of self-regulation strategies to ease foreign language learning anxiety. Philips (1992) studied the correlation between foreign language classroom anxiety and students' oral performance. The results showed that foreign language classroom anxiety had a significant negative impact on students' oral performance. Arnold (2000) proposed that emotional factors have an indescribable influence on learners' language acquisition. Positive emotions can promote learners'

language learning, including spoken language output, making their understanding faster and more thorough; while negative emotions (such as anxiety, tension, depression). In addition, Ehrman (2003); Dornyei and Skehan (2005) began to pay attention to the influence of individual learner differences on language acquisition. In addition to emotional factors, the learner's age, gender, learning strategy, learning style, and cognitive characteristics all have an impact on language learning. McRae (2012) investigated individual differences in emotion regulation through experimental research and found that men adjusting emotion automatically more than women do will interfere with the entire process of language learning.

Some Chinese scholars believe that the learners in the process of learning English will exist many obstacles, embodied in less-standard pronunciation intonation, small vocabulary, inefficient grammar knowledge as well as the severe adverse psychological factors, such as anxiety, tension. For example, Zhou (2003) pointed out that the obstacles in college students' oral English output are mainly manifested in two aspects: psychological barriers and thinking barriers. Qian (2007) used the research methods of classroom observation, questionnaire survey and interview to analyze the problems of non-English majors in spoken English, including vocabulary problems, thinking mode problems and psychological problems. Dai (2009) found through a questionnaire survey that 42.93% of students believe that the language environment is very important for the improvement of spoken English ability. Jin and Liu (2015) conducted a questionnaire survey on spoken English among 1,000 college students from 163 different majors in 7 universities in Shanghai, and found that most of the students had spoken English disorders, which were caused by: psychological disorders, comprehension disorders, phonological disorders and vocabulary disorders. Jin and Liu (2015) found that some college students were too nervous and anxious when conducting English conversations through a questionnaire survey, which directly affected the fluency and accuracy of the expression, and even led to dare not speak. Shi (2017) analyzed the oral English disorders of junior high school students. She believed that the oral English obstacles were reflected in the following aspects: students show shyness, lack of confidence, nervousness and anxiety when speaking in English; their vocabulary is not rich; they have poor pronunciation and intonation; students have little knowledge of the cultures of the English-speaking countries; not many places can practice spoken English in daily life.

At present, the main place for Chinese students to practice spoken English is the classroom. However, most schools apply large classes to teach, and the number of classes is huge, which is not conducive to teachers' effective management of teaching. In addition, due to the large number of classes and limited class time, this leads to fewer opportunities for students to practice spoken English. Most colleges and universities in China have very few English courses for non-English majors. They only offer English courses in the first and second year. There are 2 semesters in each school year. There are 9 weeks in each semester, for English courses including 2 credit hours of reading and writing, and 2 credit hours of listening and speaking every week. This shows that students have very little time to practice oral English in the classroom. Since students' language learning environment is not ideal, it is difficult for students to improve their speaking ability.

Methodology

Participants

This study will randomly select 30 subjects from Jiangxi University of Engineering, all of whom is freshmen in non-English majors. Since their mother tongue is Chinese, they have been taught in Chinese since childhood and Chinese is one of the main subjects in the college entrance examination. They can use Chinese for listening, speaking, reading and writing without any obstacles. Among them, college students majoring in liberal arts and science should basically reach a moderate proportion.

Instruments

The instruments adopted in this study include questionnaire surveys. According to the scoring contents and standards in the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) Rating Scale (The CET is a national English test administered by the Chinese ministry of education) and the dimension division of the "English hearing impairment questionnaire" compiled by Liang (2017), this study finally will determine two dimensions of English speaking impairment (language impairment and non-language impairment). Then, according to the purpose of the study, the questions with low relevance will be eliminated, and some questions related to students' English learning in Jiangxi University of Engineering will be added, finally forming the questionnaire for this study.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from Lin's (2017) "Oral Disorders Questionnaire". The questionnaire adopts the 1-5 like rt-scale, which requires each participant to choose the answer corresponding to himself according to his real situation. Each question has five choices: A. Strongly disagree; B. Disagree; C. Neither agree nor disagree; D. Agree; E. Strongly agree. According to the Oxford (1990) survey scale of language learning strategies, if the average score of participants is lower than 2.4, it means that the relevant strategies are rarely used. If the average score of the participants is between 2.5 and 3.4, the relevant strategies are occasionally used; If the average score of the participants is above 3.5, the relevant strategy is frequently used. After the questionnaires are collected, the software SPSS 23.0 is used for analysis. Based on the participants' average score for each question, the frequencies can be divided into low, medium, and high. The higher the frequency of the participant's choice is, the more significant the obstacle is.

Results and Discussions

This part is mainly to provide a specific analysis of the results of questionnaire surveys, so as to answer the two research questions of this study: What are the spoken English obstacles confronted by non-English major college students? And what are the factors of non-English major college students' spoken English obstacles?

Obstacles Confronted by Non-English Major College Students

After analyzing the collected questionnaires using the software SPSS 23.0, the first research question is answered through two common measures (mean and standard deviation). Table 1 describes a specific descriptive statistic of English speaking obstacles of non-English major college students, with a total of seven types of oral obstacles mean and standard deviation.

The mean of the sample population was 3.19 (Std. Deviation: 0.96), indicating that non-English majors had English speaking obstacles. The average of each speaking disorder, from highest to lowest, is: pronunciation and intonation obstacle (Mean: 3.51; Std. Deviation: 0.92), grammar obstacle (Mean: 3.40; Std. Deviation: 1.00), learning method and habit obstacle (Mean: 3.40; Std. Deviation: 0.95), vocabulary obstacle (Mean: 3.33; Std. Deviation: 1.27), psychology obstacle (Mean: 3.27; Std. Deviation: 1.02), culture obstacle (Mean: 3.13; Std. Deviation: 0.97), environment obstacle (Mean: 2.85; Std. Deviation: 0.93). Among them, the highest is the pronunciation and intonation obstacle and the lowest is the environmental obstacle.

Table 1 clearly shows that the average of the seven types of speaking disorders is between 2.85 and 3.51, which falls into the medium and high frequency range according to Oxford's (1990) classification. The mean of pronunciation and intonation obstacle is the highest, indicating that pronunciation and intonation is the biggest problem encountered by non-English majors when speaking English. Among these seven types of obstacles, the mean of environment obstacle is the lowest which means the spoken English of non-English majors is less affected by the environment. It can also be seen from Table 1 that the standard deviation values are relatively low, basically below 1.20, indicating that mostly subjects have similar attitudes towards these seven obstacles.

Table 1 *The Statistics of English Spoken Obstacles*

Obstacles of Spoken English	Sub-classification	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
	Pronunciation and Intonation	3.51	0.92	30
Verbal Obstacles	Grammar	3.40	1.00	30
	Vocabulary	3.33	1.27	30
	Psychology	3.27	1.02	30
	Learning Method and Habit	3.40	0.95	30
Non-verbal Obstacles	Culture	3.13	0.97	30
	Environment	2.85	0.93	30
Total		3.19	0.96	30

Verbal Obstacles

As shown in Table 2, there are three aspects of language disorders, including pronunciation and intonation, grammar, and vocabulary. There are 3 questions for pronunciation and intonation disorder. The mean for question 4 (I can't pronounce all the IPA correctly, which

affects my spoken English) is 3.73; the mean for question 5 (I can't pronounce every word I know correctly, which affects my spoken English) is 3.50; and the mean for question 6 (I can't distinguish the different meanings of the same English sentence in different intonation, which affects my spoken English) is 3.30. The means of question 4 and question 5 are higher, which indicates that non-English majors have barriers in English phonetic symbol and word pronunciation. Question 7 (Mean: 3.40) is a grammatical obstacle. Question 8 (mean: 3.33) is a vocabulary obstacle. The mean value of pronunciation and intonation obstacle is higher than that of grammar and vocabulary obstacles, indicating that among verbal obstacles, pronunciation and intonation obstacle is clearly manifested.

Table 2 *The Statistics of Verbal Obstacles*

Verbal Obstacles of Spoken English	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
	4	3.73	0.91	30
Pronunciation and Intonation	5	3.50	0.94	30
	6	3.30	0.92	30
Grammar	7	3.40	1.00	30
Vocabulary	8	3.33	1.27	30

Non-verbal Obstacles

Nonverbal obstacles fall into four categories: psychology, learning methods and habit, culture, and environment. As shown in Table 3, there are 4 questions of psychological disorders, involving anxiety, self-confidence, interest, motivation. The mean of question 10 (I feel anxious when I speak in English, which affects my spoken English) is 3.03; the mean of question 11 (I am timid and shy, and I am not confident in speaking English, which affects my spoken English) is 3.07; the average of question 16 (I don't think fluent spoken English is important for English study) is 3.43; the average of question 23 (My teacher's teaching methods are outdated and I am unwilling to listen) is 3.53 (standard deviation of 1.01). And the average of the four questions is 3.27, which belongs to the middle frequency range, indicating that the subjects have strong psychological obstacles such as anxiety and self-confidence.

Table 3 *The Statistics of Non-Verbal Obstacles*

Non-Verbal Obstacles of Spoken English	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Psychology	10	3.73	0.93	30
	11	3.50	1.02	30
	16	3.30	1.04	30
	23	3.53	1.07	30
	9	3.40	1.25	30
Learning Method and Habit	14	3.27	0.83	30
	17	3.70	0.84	30
	18	3.60	0.93	30
	21	3.03	0.89	30
	12	3.43	0.77	30
Culture	13	2.97	1.13	30
	19	3.00	1.00	30
	15	2.80	1.06	30
	20	3.47	0.90	30
Environment	22	3.27	0.98	30
	24	2.47	0.86	30
	25	2.23	0.86	30

Question 9, 14, 17, 18 and 21 are regards as the obstacles of learning methods and habits, and it can be seen from Table 3 that the mean of the five questions is between 3.03 and 3.70, which belongs to the medium and high frequency range, indicating that the learning methods and habits of non-English majors have an impact on their English speaking disorders. The mean of question 17 (I don't want to spend time practicing spoken English) is 3.70, and the mean of question 18 (In speaking practice, I am unwilling to correct myself when I realize pronunciation mistakes) is 3.60. In combination with psychological obstacles, these two questions suggest that their subjective initiative is not strong, which is an important factor leading to spoken disorders.

Question 12, 13, and 19 are related to cultural obstacles. Question 12 (I don't know much about the cultural difference between east and West, which affects my spoken English) had the highest mean (3.43) among them, which shows that in oral communication, oral barriers for non-English major college students are caused due to differences in cultural background knowledge.

Question 15, 20, 22, 24, 25 are environmental obstacles, and these involves teaching and campus environments. The mean of question 20 (My teacher doesn't encourage us to use spoken English in class.) is 3.47 which peaks to the high frequency, and the mean value of

question 22 (In class, when I made mistakes in oral practice, my teacher would not listen patiently and give feedback) is 3.27, both of which shows that the English speaking disorder of non-English majors is closely related to the teaching environment in which the student is located. In addition, the means of both question 15 and 24 are beyond 2.40 indicate that lack of language environment has a great impact on students' language learning.

In summary, there are two barriers to spoken English for non-English majors: verbal and non-verbal obstacles. Compared with the two, when the mean value of item is higher, the language disorder is more obvious. Verbal obstacles include pronunciation and intonation, grammar and vocabulary, and the mean of the three is ordered from high to low as pronunciation and intonation obstacle, grammar obstacle and vocabulary obstacle. Nonverbal obstacles include psychology, learning methods and habit, culture and environment, which the mean of learning method and habit obstacle is the highest. Barriers to psychology, culture, and environment also have an impact on spoken English of non-English majors.

Factors of Non-English Major College Students' Spoken English Obstacles

Based on the analysis of questionnaire data, it can be summarized that the causes of English speaking disorder among non-English major college students are two aspects: subjective factors and objective factors. This answers the second research question of this paper: what are the factors of non-English major college students' spoken English obstacles.

Subjective Factors

Psychological disorders are currently one of the main obstacles faced by non-English majors, according to Table 1, the mean value of psychological disorders is 3.27, according to Oxford's (1990) classification, which belongs to the medium frequency range, indicating that this type of disorder is obvious. Anxiety of foreign language learners can affect their learning process and oral expression ability of foreign languages, and when learners feel nervous and afraid, they often cannot successfully carry out oral expression, especially for Chinese students who lack a language environment. Psychological studies have shown that emotional factors play an 80% role in people's learning (Zhang, 2004). Because most students pay more attention to self-image, they care about what others think and evaluate of themselves. Therefore, in front of people, they do rarely speak English because of being afraid of making mistakes, which causes students lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. This inferiority complex further affects their spoken English expression (Krashen, 1982). These is not conducive to the improvement of English speaking skills.

The results of the questionnaire show that students' spoken English has barriers on pronunciation and intonation, grammar, and vocabulary. Most of the subjects state that they lack of vocabulary, and their English pronunciation and intonation are poor. According to Swain's "output hypothesis" theory, insufficient input will affect the output, thus, basic skills such as insufficient vocabulary and ungrounded grammar knowledge will affect the student's oral output. At the same time, according to the survey data, subjects who are unwilling to take the initiative to find various methods to practice spoken English after class account for a large proportion. This shows that students do not have good learning methods and habits, are not willing to spend more time and energy practicing spoken English.

Objective Factors

Language and culture are closely related, and different cultural backgrounds can lead to difficulties in making oral outputs. Only by understanding the cultural background of these countries can we deeply appreciate its lifestyle, religious beliefs, ways of thinking, values and aesthetic tastes, which will help to improve the ability to use language. However, from the results of the questionnaire, most of the participants states that their lack of understanding of the cultural differences between the East and the West led to a lack of English speaking disorders. In addition, the cultivation of students' language ability is largely constrained by the environment. A favorable language environment can greatly promote the cultivation of students' language ability. The data shows that in the classroom, subjects have fewer opportunities to practice spoken English, and the large class size makes it impossible for teachers to effectively manage classes and organize oral activities. In addition, the school does not often hold English speaking competition activities, not to say English speaking activities.

A qualified English teacher is the key to English education in universities, because any teaching method and model is implemented by teachers. The results show that most students believe that their teachers' teaching concepts and methods are not innovative enough, and many of them do not successfully create an English-speaking language environment in the classroom and organize oral training less frequently. These factors can lead to spoken English learning disabilities for non-English majors. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, receiving a large amount of comprehensible language input is the primary condition for language acquisition. It can be seen that the importance of language input. Teachers, as a direct source of students to obtain language input, is crucial to the improvement of students' spoken English ability.

Conclusion

This study takes Swain's output hypothesis, Krashen's input hypothesis, Nattinger and Decarrico's chunk theory as the theoretical framework, and is guided by the research results of many scholars on learners' spoken English obstacles. It investigates the English spoken language obstacles of 30 non-English major college students in Jiangxi University of Engineering, and use the questionnaire survey method to illustrate the specific performance of English spoken language obstacles and their factors.

Studies have shown that, first of all, non-English major college students do have spoken English language obstacles. Secondly, there are two main types of English speaking disorders for non-English college students: verbal obstacles and non-verbal obstacles, of which verbal obstacles include pronunciation and intonation, grammar and vocabulary, and non-verbal obstacles include psychology, learning methods and habits, culture, and environment. Finally, this study analyzed the factors affecting the English speaking disorder of non-English college students from subjective and objective perspectives. Subjective factors mainly include the influences of students' anxiety, timidity and other undesirable psychological factors, the students' limited knowledge level, and students' bad learning methods and habits. The objective factors are mainly summarized as the lack of cultural background knowledge, the lack of real language environment, and the lack of innovative teaching methods and means.

Based on the analysis of the factors affecting non-English college students' oral English obstacles, students should pay attention to learning basic knowledge, invest time and energy in language learning, and increase language input. College campus where students spend the longest time is an important place for students to learn spoken English. Schools should strengthen the construction of language environment, create a good English environment and atmosphere, so that students can get more input than the target output. College English teachers should be soberly aware of the responsibilities endowed by the times, focus on the future of students, based on the development of the country and society, change education concepts, make full use of modern teaching methods and means, optimize the teaching process, and give play to the initiative of students.

Implications and Applications

This study investigated the current situation of non-English major college students' oral English, which has practical significance for improving the non-English major college students' oral expression ability. Meantime, there are still many problems in oral English teaching in China, and there are many reasons that affect its production. For example, the teacher's teaching mode, teaching concept and teaching method will have a significant impact on the teacher's teaching effect. This study helps teachers improve the quality of their oral teaching and solve the problems in oral teaching after investigating the spoken English teaching of non-English major students from the multiple dimensions. Thus, it further provides reference suggestions for non-English major spoken teachers to make it achieve better teaching effect.

Although some suggestions for future research has been made, there are still some shortcomings and flaws in the study. It is hoped that these limitations can provide new perspectives for future research. First, the study randomly selected 30 students from one university, and the number of participants was small, and the results did not fully reflect the problem. Therefore, in future research, the scope of research objects shall be expanded so that the scope of application of the research results can be more extensive. Second, the questionnaire was not authoritative enough. In this study, the questionnaire survey method was mainly used. An authoritative questionnaire on the obstacles of spoken English was not be found, so it was adapted from the combination of CET-SET Rating Scale, Bao's (2014) study as well as that of (Lin's, 2017). Finally, there are many factors that lead to English speaking disorder among non-English majors, and in this study, the analysis of the factors that produce English speaking obstacles is not thorough and comprehensive enough.

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