EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES IN CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' SPOKEN ENGLISH: BEYOND THE SURFACE

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Abstract

This study explored the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in China, particularly in speaking skills. A mixed-method approach was employed to gather data from survey, interview, and observation to ensure the validity and credibility of the results. The questionnaire used for data collection included five key issues: a) Vocabulary and Grammar, b) Practice Opportunities, c) Confidence and Anxiety, d) Cultural Influence, and e) Teacher-student Interactions. 736 students from different prestigious universities in China participated in the survey, while 20 students and 10 teachers from the prestigious universities in China were selected based on their proficiency levels and varying years of teaching experiences for the interview respectively. Classroom observations were conducted in various EFL classes to access the speaking activities. The findings identified key obstacles such as lack of practice opportunities, anxiety, insufficient vocabulary and grammar, and culture factors that hinder effective communication. Recommendations for educators and policymakers are discussed to enhance speaking proficiency among EFL learners.

Keywords: Chinese EFL Students, English Speaking Problems, English Speaking Skills, Mixed-Method Approach

INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak English is highly valued in China at all educational levels, as it has become a crucial global language in the current era of globalization (Qi, 2016). English exams are receiving a lot of attention because non-English majors must pass the College English Test (CET) in order to graduate (Zheng and Cheng, 2008), English majors must pass the Test for English Major (TEM) (Jin & Fan, 2011), and English is a required language on college entrance and university standard tests (MOE, 2011). Even so, students' spoken English fluency is still a problem, even though they frequently receive high scores on these exams (Zhinan, 2024). Speaking abilities are mainly disregarded in current assessments, which primarily assess writing, reading, and listening abilities (Fan, 2020). Scientific studies (Xu, 2018; Li et al. 2024) also emphasizes how difficult it is for many Chinese students to use English in academic and real-world social settings. Chinese citizens' English proficiency must be raised in order for them to fully engage in the global economy. Thus, it is imperative to concentrate on conquering these obstacles.

The Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis by Long (1996) are two theoretical frameworks that are beneficial to the field of second language acquisition because they provide helpful perspectives to comprehend the current situation. The Input Hypothesis states that when learners are exposed to understandable

input that is just a little bit above their current proficiency level, language acquisition takes place. The low mean scores in this study's practice opportunities section suggest that Chinese EFL learners have limited opportunities to converse with native speakers or in authentic English-speaking contexts, which may account for their deficiency in the input required to acquire speaking skills. Meanwhile, the Interaction Hypothesis, which holds that interaction and meaning negotiation enhance language development, emphasizes the value of social interaction in language learning. In Chinese classrooms, traditional teacher-centered methods may limit these kinds of interactions, which could have an impact on students' speaking abilities because they might not provide enough chances for them to practice speaking in a meaningful and collaborative manner, which is crucial for language development.

Although previous studies on EFL learning in China have touched on a variety of topics, they have not thoroughly examined the intricate and combined effects of educational and cultural factors in the Chinese context. In particular, little research has been done on the relationship between students' speaking ability, cultural values, and the conventional exam-oriented educational system. For example, it is unclear how cultural norms like deference to authority and an emphasis on harmony within the group impact students' speaking habits and how they view the value of speaking abilities in light of the exam-focused system. Furthermore, more research is required to fully examine Chinese EFL learners and their distinct educational and cultural background, as previous studies have primarily focused on general EFL populations. By thoroughly examining the speaking difficulties faced by Chinese EFL learners and providing useful advice, this study seeks to close these gaps.

A mixed-methods approach will be used in this study to examine the research questions. In order to gather quantitative information on how Chinese EFL students view and experience speaking abilities, a survey will be given to a sizable sample of them. In order to obtain qualitative insights, interviews with teachers and students will also be done. The teaching and learning process will also be observed in the classroom. This study attempts to gain a more thorough grasp of the speaking difficulties faced by Chinese EFL learners by integrating these approaches. Additionally, the goal of this study is to pinpoint practical methods for raising their speaking ability.

The ensuing review of the literature will look at the current findings regarding the variables influencing the speaking abilities of EFL students in light of the theoretical viewpoints presented and the research gaps noted. The Input Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis will be examined, as well as the ways in which cultural and educational factors interact to affect speaking ability. By synthesizing the literature, we can determine areas that require more research and gain a better understanding of the state of knowledge today.

Theories and Concepts in Language Learning and Speaking Skills

Several significant theories in the field of second language acquisition elucidate the process of learning English as a second language, particularly the development of speaking skills. Two primary hypotheses widely employed in contemporary linguistics are the Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis by Long (1996). The Input Hypothesis underscores the importance of exposure to language input

in the language acquisition process. Chinese EFL learners' language proficiency could suffer due to limited access to authentic English input, particularly in conversational settings. For instance, students might struggle to enhance their speaking skills without sufficient opportunities to participate in genuine English conversations or interact with native speakers. Both the caliber and volume of student-teacher and student-student interactions (The Interaction Hypothesis) are critical in classroom settings. However, these interactions may be limited by the teacher-centered approach that is common in Chinese classrooms, which would have an effect on how well students speak.

Speaking constitutes a fundamental component of language acquisition, alongside reading, writing, and listening comprehension. Oral communication and aural comprehension are crucial for facilitating effective verbal interaction and communicative competence, and these skills are interconnected (Sadiku, 2015). Speaking fluently is essential in today's connected world to succeed in both the academic and professional spheres (Tiwari, 2024). Studies have shown that students with strong English communication capabilities are better equipped for international and real-world interactions (Sharif and Channa, 2022). Beyond language proficiency, students require background knowledge and non-linguistic information to communicate effectively (Azizifard, 2024). However, in the context of Chinese EFL learners, the development of speaking skills often lags behind due to various factors, which will be further explored in the subsequent sections.

Factors Affecting Chinese EFL Learner's Speaking Skills

Chinese EFL learners encounter significant obstacles in honing their speaking abilities, primarily stemming from two key sets of factors: those related to the learners themselves (such as anxiety and lack of confidence, and vocabulary and grammar constraints) and those tied to the learning environment (including limited practice opportunities, and cultural influences and traditional teaching methodologies).

Anxiety and self-assurance issues pose major challenges for Chinese EFL students in oral expression. Studies by Le (2024) and Wang (2023) reveal that many learners feel uneasy speaking out in class, mainly due to concerns about pronunciation and intonation. Particularly for Chinese students, grappling with language proficiency and unfamiliar discussion topics creates discomfort, leading to mental barriers that impede effective English-speaking practice. Furthermore, the fear of errors and judgment from peers and teachers can heighten this lack of confidence, dissuading students from active participation in speaking tasks. This not only restricts their engagement but also limits avenues for enhancement.

A rich vocabulary and strong grasp of grammar serve as vital components for effective communication (Muklas et al., 2024). However, numerous Chinese EFL students face hurdles with vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing the necessity for targeted interventions (Manorom et al., 2024). Insufficient knowledge in these areas can obstruct clear, fluent self-expression, often resulting in hesitation and reduced speaking proficiency.

In Chinese educational settings, traditional teaching methods have historically emphasized memorization and grammar drills over interactive speaking activities (Yi,

2024). Moreover, English speaking skills are frequently marginalized in pivotal Chinese examinations like the College Entrance Examination (GAOKAO), CET, and TEM tests (Qian and Cumming, 2017). Consequently, students have limited chances to engage in authentic, meaningful speaking interactions. The absence of exposure to real-life English contexts and interactive exercises significantly impedes their acquisition of effective speaking skills.

China's educational landscape reflects a deep historical backdrop, with influences from Confucian principles that endure to this day (Dinh & Van Dung, 2024). The prolonged emphasis on examinations has nurtured a culture focusing on memorization and exam preparation at the expense of communicative proficiency (Lu, 2024). This examination-driven system, honed since the inception of the People's Republic of China in 1949, prioritizes test outcomes and admission rates over students' autonomy, innovation, and personal development (Huang, 2024). Within the realm of English education, this orientation leads to an emphasis on memorizing vocabulary and grammar regulations, with limited attention to practical speaking competencies. Consequently, students often find themselves ensnared in a cycle of rote learning that hampers their continual advancement in mastering English (Zheng, 2022). Additionally, the teacher-centric approach, marked by didactic lectures and rote memorization, further curtails students' opportunities for active engagement and speaking practice.

Previous Research on Strategies for Improving Speaking Proficiency

When considering the diverse array of strategies applicable to various scenarios, this research will delineate two primary categories. The first category encompasses Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), while the second category involves Peer Interaction and Collaboration, and the Flipped Classroom Approach. To cap this segment of our exploration, we will culminate the literature reviews by presenting Synthesis and Connection to Research Questions.

In their publication 'Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching,' Richards and Rodgers (2001) delineate several approaches to enhance the speaking skills of EFL learners. CLT, originating in the late 1970s, centers on a learner-focused, meaning-oriented methodology that prioritizes fluency over precision (Spada, 2007). TBLT concentrates on cognitive aspects and the practical application of language (Ahmadian, 2016). Implementing these methodologies in the Chinese educational milieu may encounter obstacles due to the entrenched traditional teaching ethos and the examination-centric approach. While studies indicate that CLT and TBLT can advance students' oral proficiency by providing ample opportunities for significant interactions and task-oriented exercises, the shift from conventional teaching methods necessitates meticulous attention to various factors such as educator training, student readiness, and evaluation procedures. For instance, teachers may require training to formulate suitable communicative tasks and furnish constructive feedback within a CLT or TBLT classroom. Furthermore, the evaluation system may necessitate adjustments to harmonize with the objectives of these teaching methodologies, placing more emphasis on students' capacity to communicate effectively in real-life scenarios.

Peer Interaction and Collaboration have shown promise in augmenting speaking skills and mitigating anxiety (Dörnyei, 2007). Through collaborative endeavors and

mutual feedback exchange, students can refine their speaking abilities in a relaxed and supportive setting. The Flipped Classroom Approach empowers students to personalize their learning pace and assume greater accountability for their education, yielding enhanced learning outcomes, particularly for underachieving students (Nouri, 2016). This approach has the potential to amplify students' speaking practice beyond classroom confines, fostering increased engagement during class sessions. Nevertheless, the efficacy of these strategies may hinge on factors like student motivation, resource availability, and support from educators and institutions. For instance, students must be incentivized to actively engage in peer interactions and collaborative endeavors. Moreover, the presence of adequate technology and educational materials is pivotal for the successful implementation of the flipped classroom approach. Educators need to offer guidance and assistance to facilitate students in maximizing the benefits of these strategies.

The above-reviewed literature underscores the intricate interplay of factors influencing the speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL learners. Factors related to learners, such as anxiety and lexical constraints, intersect with environmental factors, including cultural backdrop and pedagogical methodologies. While extant research on teaching strategies furnishes prospective solutions, their deployment and efficacy necessitate further exploration within the Chinese educational landscape. This study aims to bridge the existing gaps in literature by meticulously scrutinizing the speaking impediments encountered by Chinese EFL learners and proposing pragmatic remedies. By comprehending the synergistic effects of these diverse factors on speaking competence, we can adeptly address the research queries (in Methodology section) and formulate strategies to enrich the speaking abilities of Chinese EFL learners. By pinpointing the specific manners in which cultural context and traditional teaching approaches impact students' speaking exercises, we can devise interventions that account for these influences and foster more efficacious language acquisition. Additionally, through evaluating the viability of varied teaching methodologies like CLT, TBLT, peer interaction, and the flipped classroom approach, we can ascertain the most suitable approaches for the Chinese EFL learning domain and adapt them to suit students' requirements.

Theoretical Framework – Sociocultural Theory of Second Language Acquisition

The Sociocultural Theory of Second Language Acquisition (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) provides a thorough framework for understanding Chinese EFL learners' speaking challenges. According to this theory, learning a language is a social and cultural process in which students actively acquire knowledge through social interactions and are influenced by their cultural environment.

Social interaction is crucial when it comes to Chinese EFL students. For instance, the study identifies limited practice opportunities, which can be analyzed through this lens. In traditional Chinese classrooms, the teacher-centered approach could hinder the quantity and quality of social interactions among students. The Sociocultural Theory states that this type of limited interaction reduces students' opportunities to practice meaningful and collaborative speaking, which is essential for language development. For learners to internalize language knowledge and improve their speaking abilities, they need opportunities to participate in dialogues, discussions, and group projects with teachers and peers. But given China's current educational system, which is marked by big class

sizes and teacher-dominated instruction, these kinds of interactions might not be sufficiently supported.

Moreover, cultural background has a big impact. Chinese cultural values, such as the reverence for authority figures and the stress on group harmony, have the potential to shape students' perspectives and behaviors in English communication. Due to the priority placed on maintaining group unity, students might hesitate to engage actively in classroom conversations for fear of disrupting harmony or committing errors in the presence of their teachers and classmates. This cultural background interacts with the educational system's emphasis on memorization and test preparation. The exam-centric culture may lead students to prioritize achieving high scores in written exams over developing speaking skills, as spoken skills are not as prominently assessed in major examinations like the College Entrance Examination (GAOKAO), CET, and TEM tests. Consequently, this dynamic affects their motivation and dedication to honing their speaking abilities.

Furthermore, the theory highlights the agency of the learner, emphasizing that Chinese EFL learners are not merely passive receivers of language instruction but rather active contributors who can influence their own learning paths. Nevertheless, the conventional educational setting may not consistently support this agency. For instance, constraints such as restricted options in educational resources and teaching approaches may hinder students from exploring and honing their speaking skills according to their unique learning preferences. Through recognizing and valuing the learner's agency, educators can more effectively enable students to take charge of their speaking practice and surmount challenges they confront.

In the data collection phase, the Sociocultural Theory informed the design of interview questions. These questions were crafted to delve into students' experiences of social interaction in the classroom and their perceptions of how cultural values influence their speaking skills. During analysis, the concept of learner agency was operationalized by scrutinizing students' efforts to take charge of their learning, such as seeking additional speaking practice beyond the classroom or incorporating English into their daily lives. The theory also shaped the interpretation of results; for instance, students' reluctance to speak in class was viewed in light of the cultural value of authority respect and the absence of a supportive learning environment that encourages risk-taking. Overall, the Sociocultural Theory provided a structured approach to unpacking the intricate web of factors (illustrated in Figure 1) contributing to the speaking challenges encountered by Chinese EFL learners and guided the formulation of strategies to tackle these hurdles.
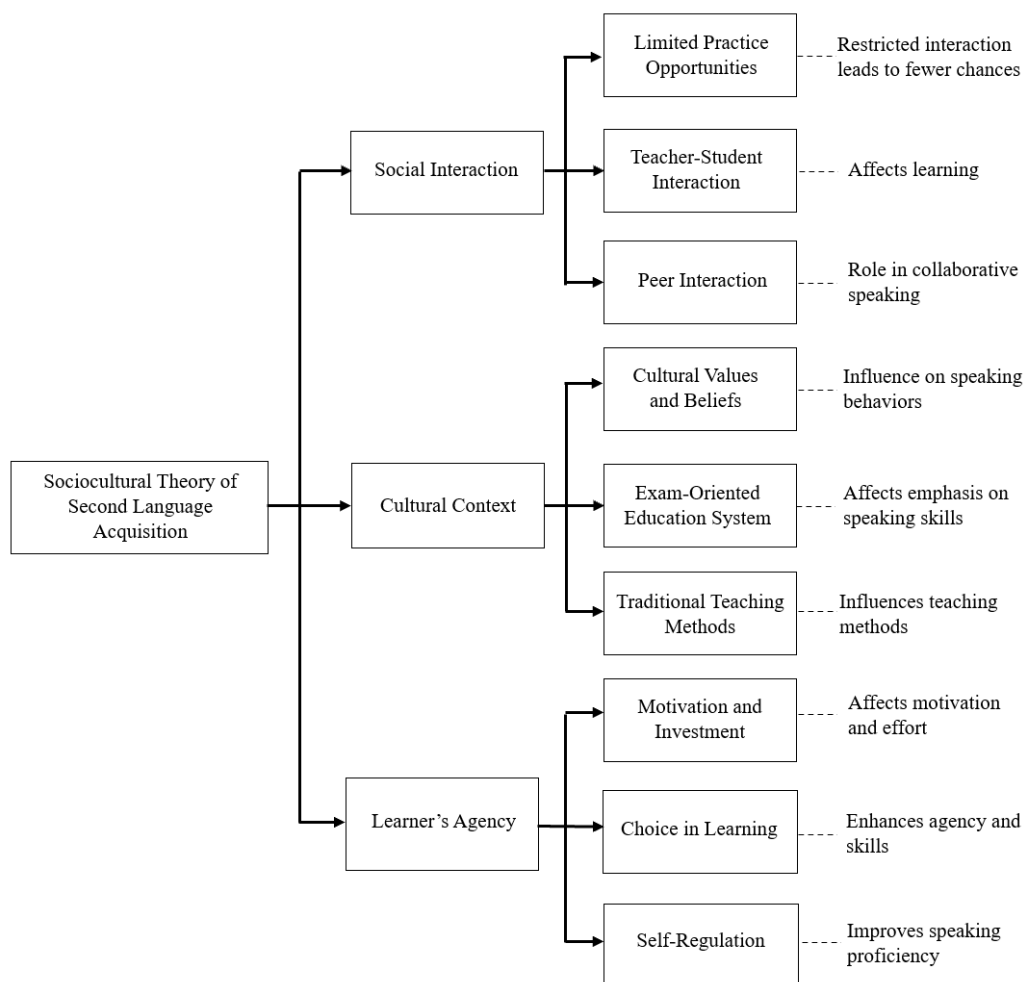
Figure 1 The Sociocultural Theory and Its Relationship to Research Variables

METHOD

Research Design and Questions

A thorough four-step process is used in this study to understand the challenges Chinese EFL learners face when speaking the language and to offer practical answers. A deeper understanding of this complex issue is made possible by the study's combination of qualitative and quantitative data through the use of a sequential explanatory research methodology (see in Figure 2). In order to shed light on the particular challenges that students have and identifying practical strategies that will help them improve their English-speaking skills are the goals of this study. The two main questions are: (1) What factors impact the English-speaking proficiency of Chinese EFL learners? (2) What strategies can enhance English-speaking skills among these learners?
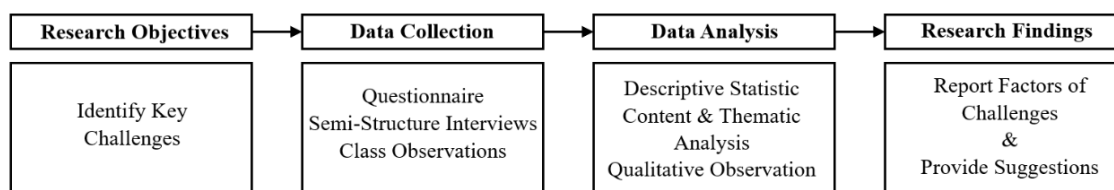
Figure 2 A Sequential Explanatory Research Design

Participants

A total of 736 Chinese EFL students from diverse backgrounds took part in the survey. These students were chosen from various prestigious universities across different regions in China utilizing a combination of random and stratified sampling methods. Additionally, ten teachers and twenty students took part in in-depth interviews. Student selection criteria were based on their performance in English courses, encompassing both high-achieving and average-performing students, as well as their voluntary participation. The teachers were chosen from different universities, varying in years of teaching experience (ranging from at least 5 to 30 years) and specializing in diverse areas such as linguistics, English literature, and English teaching. Prior to the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants to uphold ethical standards. Demographic information of both survey respondents and interviewed teachers is detailed in Tables 1 and 2, offering a comprehensive snapshot of the sample characteristics.

Table 1 Demographic Information of The Survey Participants

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	202	27.4%
	Female	534	72.6%
Years of study	1st	225	30.6%
	2nd	209	28.4%
	3rd	189	25.7%
	4th	113	15.4%
Major	English	287	39.0%
	Engineer	51	6.9%
	Internation Trade	135	18.4%
	Accountant	34	4.6%
	Finance	67	9.1%
	Business Management	167	22.7%
	Others	35	4.8%

Table 2 Demographic Information of The Interview Teachers

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	3	30%
	Female	7	70%
Years of experience	5 - 10	2	20%
	11 - 20	5	50%
	21 - 30	3	30%

Items	Categories	N	Percent (%)
Major	Linguistics	1	10%
	English Literature	5	50%
	English Teaching	2	20%
	English Translation	2	20%

Data Collection Methods

To assess the EFL skills of the students, five online electronic Likert scales were developed. The items for these scales were generated through a comprehensive process. Initially, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify key factors influencing speaking skills, encompassing aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, practice opportunities, confidence and anxiety, cultural influence, and teacher-student interaction. Subsequently, a pool of potential scale items was generated based on the literature findings. Some items were adapted from established scales in the literature, while others were specifically crafted for this study to address the unique challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners. Notably, items addressing the impact of the exam-oriented education system on speaking practice were tailored to encapsulate the particular obstacles encountered by Chinese students.

Moreover, open-ended interviews were conducted with both students and teachers to delve deeply into their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to English speaking. Student interviews focused on learning strategies, speaking difficulties, attitudes towards English learning, and interactions with teachers and peers. On the other hand, teacher interviews explored teaching methods, observations of student speaking abilities, teaching challenges, and suggestions for enhancement. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled flexibility in probing emergent topics during discussions.

Additionally, in-class observations were conducted across various EFL classrooms, following a detailed protocol that emphasized key aspects. These observations focused on student participation in speaking activities, their engagement levels, teacher-student interactions, as well as the quality of group discussions and presentations. This data collection approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the teaching and learning dynamics within the classroom setting.

Data Analysis

In this study, Chinese students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) face challenges, particularly in oral communication.Using a mixed-method approach, it integrates both qualitative and quantitative data. In order to analyze the quantitative data obtained from a survey of 736 Chinese students, SPSS version 27 and descriptive statistics were used. Several techniques were used to reduce the possibility of response biases in the surveys. This involved using reverse-coded items in the scales to detect any discrepancies in responses and giving participants clear and succinct instructions to guarantee they understood the questions.

Thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative data, which was gathered by means of classroom observations and interviews with ten teachers and twenty EFL students. In order to identify recurrent themes and patterns regarding speaking difficulties

and the contributing factors, the qualitative data was methodically coded and examined. These themes were then compared and integrated with the quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the speaking challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Quantitative Results

The research quantitatively examined five major factors influencing Chinese EFL learners' English-speaking performance: grammar and vocabulary, practice opportunities, confidence and anxiety, cultural influence, and teacher-student interaction. The detailed data for these aspects are presented in Tables 3 to 7 in Appendix. In the survey, 736 students took part, and the mean-item summated score for each Likert scale item was calculated using the methodology suggested by Warmbrod (2014). The scoring system categorized responses into low agreement (1.00 to 2.33), moderate agreement (2.34 to 3.66), and high agreement (3.67 to 5.00), facilitating an evaluation of agreement levels among the students.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the grammar and vocabulary section. The mean scores for different types of grammar and vocabulary questions varied significantly. For basic grammar (GV1, GV2, GV7, GV8) constructs like parts of speech and singular/plural forms, the mean scores were relatively low (ranging from 1.24 to 1.86), indicating that students found these relatively easy. However, for more complex grammar (GV3, GV5, GV6, GV9) such as question sentence formation and verb tenses, the mean scores were in the medium range (2.39 to 3.65), suggesting a moderate level of difficulty. Interestingly, the mean scores for practical aspects (GV10, GV11, GV12, GV13, GV14, GV15, GV16) like using slang and speaking without translation were high (4.02 to 4.66), revealing that students faced significant challenges in these areas. A possible explanation for this could be that while students are familiar with formal grammar rules through rote learning, they lack the practical application and exposure to real-life English usage, which is essential for using slang and speaking spontaneously without relying on translation. This finding is consistent with the Sociocultural Theory, as the limited exposure to natural English input in the learning environment restricts students' ability to develop these practical skills.
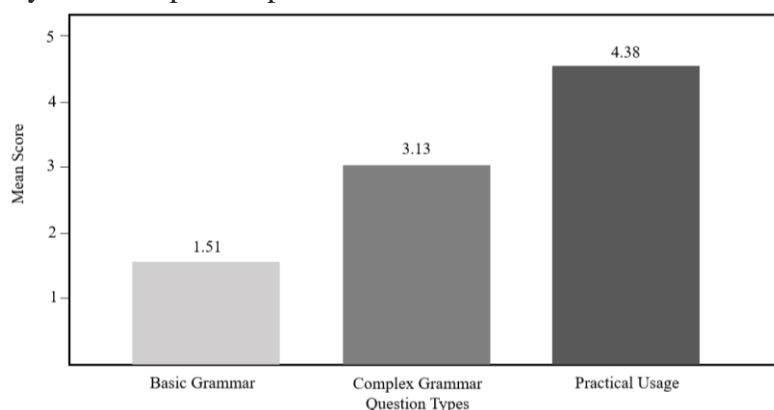

Figure 3 Comparison of Mean Scores For Grammar And Vocabulary Question Categories

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the practice opportunities section. The mean scores across all 14 questions were consistently low (ranging from 1.29 to 2.37), indicating that students had limited opportunities to practice English speaking. For example, only about 0.4% of students reported always having opportunities to speak with native speakers (PO1), and 62% never read English aloud (PO10). This lack of practice could be attributed to several factors. The traditional teaching methods in China, which focus on rote learning and grammar, do not provide enough space for interactive speaking activities. Additionally, the exam-oriented education system may lead students to prioritize written exams over speaking practice. The Great Firewall of China also restricts students' access to some international platforms that could potentially offer more practice opportunities (Taneja and Wu, 2014).
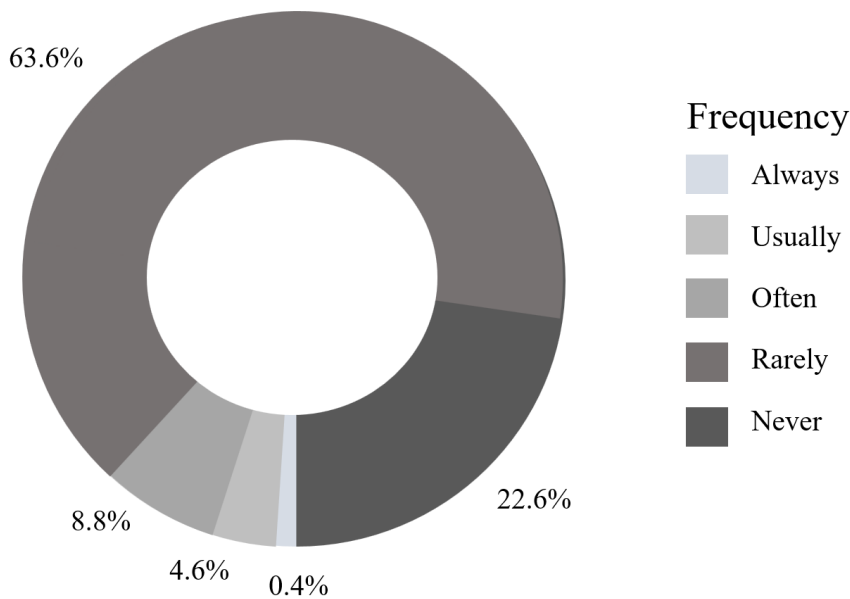

Figure 4 Distribution of Practice Opportunities to Speak English with Native Speakers (PO1)

The results for the confidence and anxiety section are presented in Table 5. The mean scores on questions (CA1, CA8, CA15) related to general anxiety in speaking English were high (3.78 to 3.99), indicating that students often felt anxious when speaking. This anxiety could be related to their concerns about making mistakes and being judged by others, which is in line with previous research on speaking anxiety (Le, 2024; Wang, 2023). In contrast, the mean scores for confidence (CA2, CA7, CA10, CA14) in class were medium (2.34 to 3.62), suggesting that students were unsure about their speaking abilities. The low level of confidence in group discussions (mean score of 2.23 in CA4) could be due to the lack of practice (CA11) and the fear of being evaluated by peers (CA1, CA14). Moreover, the majority of students did not believe that practice would improve their confidence or proficiency (CA9), which could further hinder their motivation to practice speaking.
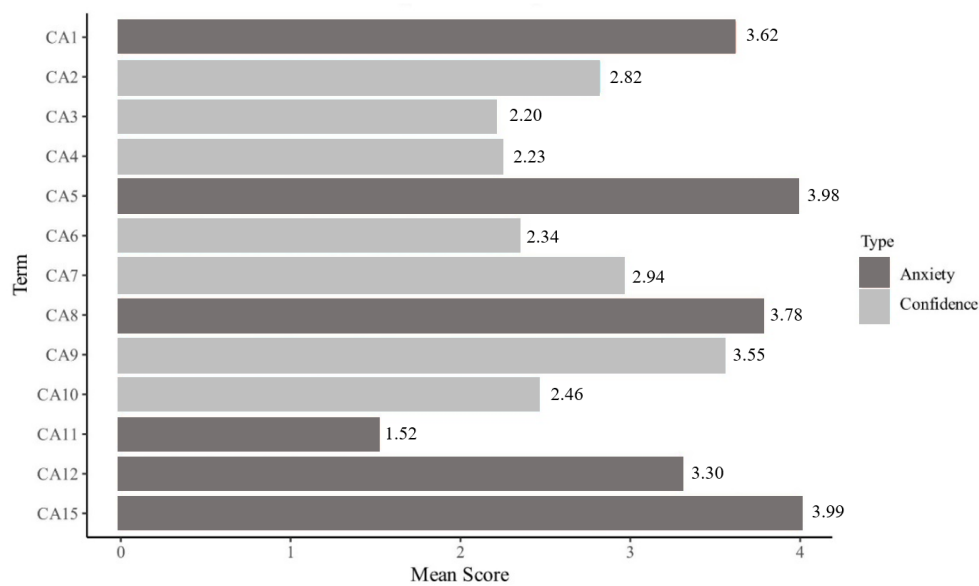
Figure 5 Comparison of Mean Scores For Confidence And Anxiety Questions by Category

Table 6 displays the descriptive statistics for the cultural influence section. The mean scores of the first eight questions (CI1-CI8) were in the medium range (2.93 to 3.50), indicating that students had a moderate understanding of how culture affects their learning. However, they felt that cultural differences hindered their expression and understanding (CT4), with 51.2% reporting feeling misunderstood. The high mean score (4.60) for wanting more opportunities to practice in diverse settings (CI10) suggests that students recognized the importance of cultural exposure for improving their speaking skills. The conventional Chinese educational system, characterized by its emphasis on memorization and exam readiness, might not sufficiently equip students for cross-cultural communication (Lu, 2024). This observation aligns with the cultural backdrop outlined in the literature review, highlighting how the priority placed on exam success could detract from cultivating effective communicative skills.
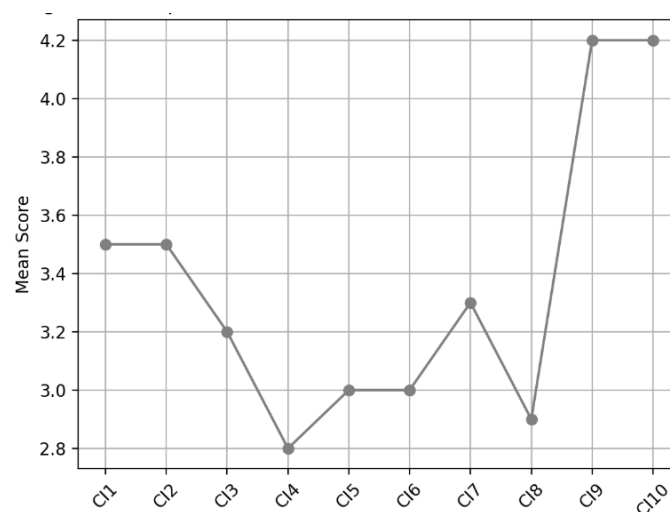

Figure 6 Comparison of Mean Scores For Cultural Influence Questions

The descriptive statistics for the teacher-student interaction section are shown in Table 7. The mean scores ranged from 2.67 to 3.17 (TS4, TS7, TS8, TS9, TS10), indicating a medium level of interaction. However, students felt that teachers did not fully understand their speaking difficulties(TS9), as 30.7% perceived the learning environment (TS5) as ineffective. The lack of regular constructive feedback (only 24% of students regularly received it in TS1) and the perception that teachers' suggestions were not always helpful (TS2) could contribute to the limited interaction. This could be related to the large class sizes and the teacher-centered teaching approach in China, which may make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention and support (Ghaleb, 2024; Lu, 2024)..
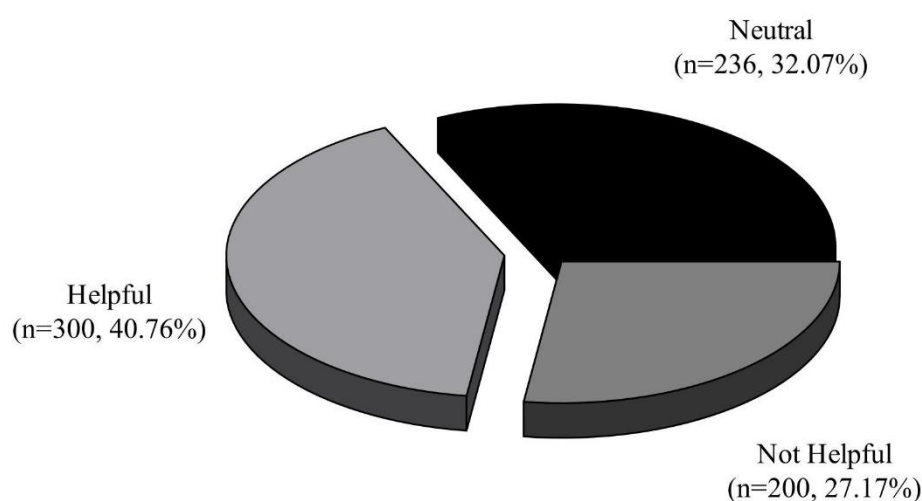

Figure 7 Proportion of Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Interaction

The survey data offers an initial glimpse into the obstacles encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in China. Yet, additional investigation is essential to uncover the root causes comprehensively and investigate possible strategies to improve their English-speaking skills further.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data was collected through interviews with 20 students and 10 teachers and classroom observations. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and verified for accuracy.

Student Interviews: The interview data corroborated and provided deeper insights into the five challenges identified in the survey. In terms of grammar and vocabulary, students recognized their importance but admitted that their focus was primarily on passing written tests. They often resorted to Chinese-version textbooks and rote learning, neglecting the practical application of speaking skills. For example, PS8 noted that despite good grades in written English, they struggled to speak fluently and use proper tenses in conversations. This aligns with the quantitative finding that students had difficulty with practical grammar and vocabulary usage.

Regarding practice opportunities, students described them as scarce or even non-existent. Many attributed this to factors such as the inability to access international apps, the prevalence of Chinese translations in learning materials, and the perception that English was not essential for their future jobs. PS3 emphasized the heavy workload and exam-oriented system, which left little time for self-initiated practice. This supports the quantitative data showing the lack of practice opportunities.

Anxiety and lack of confidence were also prominent themes. Students felt uneasy speaking English due to limited practice and concerns about their accents and pronunciation. They often compared themselves unfavorably to more proficient peers and doubted their ability to communicate effectively, leading to a reluctance to use English both in and out of class. PS14's comment about feeling uncomfortable speaking English with friends or foreigners due to pronunciation difficulties is consistent with the high anxiety levels reported in the quantitative results.

Cultural influences were complex. While students acknowledged the impact of traditional educational practices centered on memorization and exams, they also mentioned feeling pressured to conform to Western speaking styles, which they found culturally different and sometimes illogical. PS17 described a learning environment that emphasized silence and focused on written work, leaving little room for speaking practice. This is in line with the quantitative finding that students felt cultural differences hindered their expression and that the educational system did not focus enough on speaking skills.

Teacher-student interactions were generally weak. Students rarely initiated conversations with teachers, avoided answering questions in class due to nervousness, and showed little enthusiasm for English class. PS20's comment about using Chinese in group discussions and presentations highlighted the ineffectiveness of the current learning style in promoting English speaking. This corresponds to the quantitative data showing that students did not perceive teacher-student interaction as helpful.

Classroom Observations and Teacher Interviews: In the observed first-year EFL classes, the teacher (PT1) organized activities mainly for assessment purposes. Although student engagement was somewhat high, the teaching approach had limitations. The use of Mandarin in explanations and student responses, along with brief question-and-answer and free speech sessions, indicated a lack of focus on English speaking skills. The feedback session helped students recognize their speaking limitations but did not significantly enhance their abilities, as the emphasis was more on social and cognitive skills. Teacher interviews revealed that they were aware of students' speaking difficulties, mainly stemming from reluctance to speak, language barriers, and discomfort in front of peers. To address these, some teachers allowed students to use Chinese when necessary and provided English words afterward. Others encouraged speaking in class or through presentations. However, they also faced challenges such as large class sizes, limited resources, and time constraints.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the speaking challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners, the quantitative and qualitative results were integrated. For

example, in the grammar and vocabulary aspect, the qualitative data about students' reliance on rote learning and Chinese-version textbooks helps to explain the quantitative finding that they had difficulty with practical usage. The lack of practice opportunities identified in both the quantitative and qualitative data can be seen as a result of the combined influence of the traditional teaching methods, the exam-oriented system, and the cultural context. The high anxiety levels reported quantitatively are supported by the qualitative data on students' concerns about pronunciation and their lack of confidence. The cultural differences and the impact of the educational system on speaking skills, as described in the qualitative interviews, are consistent with the quantitative data on students' perceptions of cultural influence. The weak teacher-student interaction observed in the classroom and reported by students in the interviews corresponds to the quantitative data on the lack of constructive feedback and the perception of ineffective learning environment. By integrating these two types of data, a more complete picture of the complex factors contributing to the speaking challenges of Chinese EFL learners is presented, which can inform the development of more effective strategies to address these challenges.

Discussion

The study findings align with existing literature on the obstacles encountered by EFL students in developing speaking skills. The five key challenges identified - vocabulary and grammar, practice opportunities, anxiety and confidence, cultural influence, and teacher-student interactions - have been thoroughly examined using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

In terms of vocabulary and grammar, the results indicating that students struggle with practical usage despite having a relatively better grasp of formal grammar rules are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of not only knowledge but also the ability to apply it in real communication (Muklas et al., 2024). The lack of practice opportunities, as evidenced by both the survey responses and student interviews, corroborates with the literature on the dominance of rote learning and exam-oriented teaching in Chinese classrooms (Yi, 2024). The high levels of anxiety and lack of confidence reported by students are similar to what has been found in other studies on speaking anxiety (Le, 2024; Wang, 2023), emphasizing the role of psychological factors in language learning. The cultural influence, as seen in students' perceptions of cultural differences and the impact of the traditional educational system, aligns with the understanding of how cultural context shapes language learning in China (Lu, 2024; Zheng, 2022). Issues in teacher-student interaction, such as the absence of constructive feedback and an ineffective learning environment, align with existing literature on teacher-centered instruction and its implications (Ghaleb, 2024; Lu, 2024).

The study's findings have a profound impact on teaching and learning. Instead of solely focusing on written language aspects, curriculum designers should prioritize integrating speaking skills into language curricula. This integration could involve incorporating more speaking activities like debates, role-plays, and presentations to encourage practical English usage. For instance, modules exposing students to real-life English usage, such as analyzing authentic conversations or discussing English movies or TV shows, could aid students in overcoming difficulties in utilizing slang and speaking without translation.

Educational approaches need to adapt to provide more opportunities for students to engage in speaking practice within a supportive context. Teachers could embrace a student-centered methodology like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), prioritizing fluency over mere accuracy (Spada, 2007). This shift could entail creating more opportunities for pair and group work, enabling students to converse with peers and receive immediate feedback. Additionally, teachers could use technology to facilitate speaking practice, such as online language exchange platforms or language learning apps, despite the limitations imposed by the Great Firewall (Yi, 2024).

In terms of assessment, speaking skills should be given more weight in evaluations. This may involve integrating oral tests, interviews, and presentations into the assessment framework. Rather than relying exclusively on written exams, educators could implement regular speaking assessments to gauge students' proficiency in English communication. This approach would underscore the significance of speaking abilities in language acquisition, motivating students to dedicate more time and energy to enhancing their oral communication skills.

While the current interpretations of the findings seem reasonable, it is essential to explore alternative explanations. For instance, factors other than those already mentioned could contribute to the limited practice opportunities. Some students might be engrossed in personal interests or extracurricular activities, diminishing their available time for practicing English speaking. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the demanding academic workload and exam-centric culture in China likely play a pivotal role, given that a substantial number of students express constraints in practicing English due to time constraints. Furthermore, students' perception that English proficiency is not crucial for future career prospects, as highlighted by some respondents, may stem from their limited exposure to real-world applications of English within their educational environment.

Another alternative explanation could be related to individual differences among students. Some students may be more intrinsically motivated to learn English and seek out speaking opportunities on their own, regardless of the external environment. However, the overall trend in the data suggests that the majority of students are affected by the systemic factors in the educational system and the cultural context. Future research could explore these individual differences in more detail to understand how they interact with the broader environmental factors.

Many possible lines of inquiry can be proposed in light of the study's limitations and results. A thorough understanding of how the variables found in this study interact and change over the course of students' language learning trajectory may be possible by carrying out longitudinal studies to track students' speaking skill development over time. For example, a group of students could be observed by researchers from the time they first learned English in high school until they entered college, looking at how their speaking skills changed and how different pedagogical approaches or interventions affected their development.

Research could delve into the comparison of various teaching strategies or interventions aimed at addressing the highlighted challenges. For example, a study might contrast the efficacy of the flipped classroom approach (Nouri, 2016) with conventional

teaching methods in enhancing students' speaking proficiency. This investigation could entail the random allocation of classes to different instructional conditions and evaluating their influence on students' speaking abilities, motivation, and anxiety levels. Moreover, research endeavors could investigate the influence of teacher training initiatives on enhancing teacher-student interaction and the standard of speaking instruction. By equipping educators with opportunities for professional growth centered on proficient speaking teaching techniques, there is potential to elevate the educational experience and outcomes for students.

In summary, this study has shed important light on the difficulties Chinese EFL learners encounter when speaking. We can continue to deepen our understanding of this intricate field and endeavor to enhance the speaking ability of Chinese EFL students by examining the findings' ramifications in more detail, taking into account different theories, and proposing future lines of inquiry.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study has successfully identified and substantiated the key factors contributing to the challenges that Chinese EFL students face in speaking English. These elements can be classified into five categories: vocabulary and grammar, practice opportunities, confidence and anxiety, cultural influence, and teacher-student interactions.

The challenges faced by Chinese EFL students in mastering vocabulary and grammar are attributed to the underutilization of effective learning techniques and the limited opportunities for oral practice. Consequently, their speaking proficiency is negatively impacted, necessitating a heavy reliance on Chinese-English translation and impeding conversational fluency. Multiple factors contribute to the lack of practice, such as restrictions imposed by the Great Firewall of China, traditional teaching approaches that lack interaction, and students' passive engagement in communication. Moreover, feelings of anxiety and self-doubt play a significant role, as students view their language skills as insufficient, leading to nervousness during class participation and a lack of confidence in English, all of which contribute to their reluctance to speak. This cycle perpetuates obstacles to their overall language development.

The conventional Chinese educational system, characterized by its focus on memorization and exam readiness, exerts a significant cultural influence on students' proficiency in speaking English. Although these techniques might yield results in specific learning domains, they fall short in nurturing conversational abilities crucial for proficient English communication. Moreover, the absence of adequate support within the traditional educational setting, coupled with students' anxiety and self-doubt, hinders effective teacher-student interactions. This dearth of interaction not only diminishes students' motivation but also constrains their involvement in the educational journey.

The study's findings and recommendations carry significant practical implications for the field of English language teaching in China. Students stand to benefit by gaining awareness of the challenges identified, enabling them to address their learning needs proactively and enhance their speaking skills. To illustrate, students can supplement their classroom learning with extra practice through activities like language exchange

programs or online speaking communities. Teachers, on the other hand, can leverage these findings to enrich their teaching methodologies. They can integrate more interactive and communicative strategies like group discussions, debates, and role-plays to afford students ample speaking practice opportunities. Furthermore, teachers can nurture students' confidence by offering constructive feedback and cultivating a supportive educational setting.

Educational institutions hold a pivotal position in effecting policy reforms. They can allocate resources to incorporate technological tools for language acquisition, like availing language learning software and online platforms. Additionally, institutions can facilitate teacher training programs to elevate their proficiency in delivering oral instruction. Collaborating with overseas educational entities can furnish students with global insights and chances to apply English in authentic settings. Fostering extracurricular engagements like English clubs and oratory contests can further enhance students' oral communication skills.

The main takeaways from this study are as follows. First and foremost, it is critical to acknowledge the complexity of the difficulties Chinese EFL learners encounter when speaking English. These issues are interconnected, have deep cultural and educational roots, and are not isolated problems. Second, it is impossible to overestimate the significance of offering a well-rounded approach to language instruction that covers not only language proficiency but also the growth of practical abilities, self-assurance, and cultural awareness. Thirdly, encouraging student motivation and engagement in speaking practice requires good teacher-student interactions. In order to better meet the changing needs of Chinese EFL learners and enhance their speaking proficiency, it is clear that ongoing research and innovation in teaching methods and strategies are required.

The flipped classroom approach is suggested as a potential remedy, even though this study has illuminated the difficulties encountered by EFL students. But it's crucial to recognize the study's shortcomings, including the comparatively small sample size and the requirement for more extensive and varied research. Additionally useful for analyzing how these factors change over time would be longitudinal studies. By tackling these issues, we can help Chinese EFL students become more proficient English speakers and better equipped for the globalized world.

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