

A Survey and Research on Chinese College Students' Oral English Level

-- A Case Study of North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power

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Abstract

Based on a survey of Chinese college students' assessment of their oral English proficiency, this study explores the problems of, and recommends improvement for Chinese college students. The 150 subjects came from North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power (mainly sophomores and juniors, covering arts, science and other disciplines). The subjects tested their oral English level and learning situation from three dimensions of self-assessment, learning attitude and learning methods. The results show that college students in China generally have a low level of oral English, and lack confidence in their oral English ability, mainly due to the large gap between English and Chinese pronunciation, the lack of emphasis on oral English in the examination, and the lack of effective feedback for students. Based on these findings, this paper puts forward recommendations for improvements to Chinese college students' oral English learning, which will help to provide the theoretical support and a practical reference for Chinese college students' oral English learning.

Keywords

College Students; Oral English Level Assessment; Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

Stalin once said: "Language is a tool, a weapon. People use it to communicate with each other, exchange ideas and achieve mutual understanding." With the development of global economy and culture, the world is becoming increasingly interdependent. English is not only a language with wide influence, but also plays an important role in language education in China. However, most studies are based on the perspective of teaching scholars, and there are few studies based on students' own evaluation. For example, influenced by exam-oriented examination, most contemporary college students in China have learned English as "dumb English" (Peng Yanhong, 2006). Previous scholars also analyzed the learning motivation of English learners in China from the perspective of second language acquisition (Chen Yao, 2007; Peng Yanhong, 2006). Therefore, in order to understand the level of college students' oral English learning, this paper takes students from North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power as the object of investigation, examines the problems that exist in the current college students' oral English learning and discusses solutions, helps to further understand the overall level of college students' oral English and the main methods of learning, and provides reference to contemporary Chinese English teaching modes and provide students with practical English learning strategies.

2. Research Design

2.1. Respondents

The study selected 150 subjects from North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power (mainly sophomores and juniors), whose professional fields cover arts, science and other disciplines. The questionnaire mainly investigates their oral English level and learning situation from three dimensions: self-assessment, attitude and learning methods. Each dimension also covers multiple levels, including: whether the basic pronunciation of the 44 phonemes can be pronounced accurately, the number of instances of stuttering during oral English, the accuracy of word selection, the degree of logical thinking, the application of English thinking modes, the degree of confidence in oral English, natural linking and skimming, etc.

2.2. Survey Methods

This paper adopted the methods of survey questionnaire survey and voice interviews, and made use of online publicity and forwarding through the Internet at the initial stage. 150 subjects (50 boys and 100 girls) from different majors and grades were invited to participate. Finally, 120 valid questionnaires were recovered with a recovery rate of 80%.

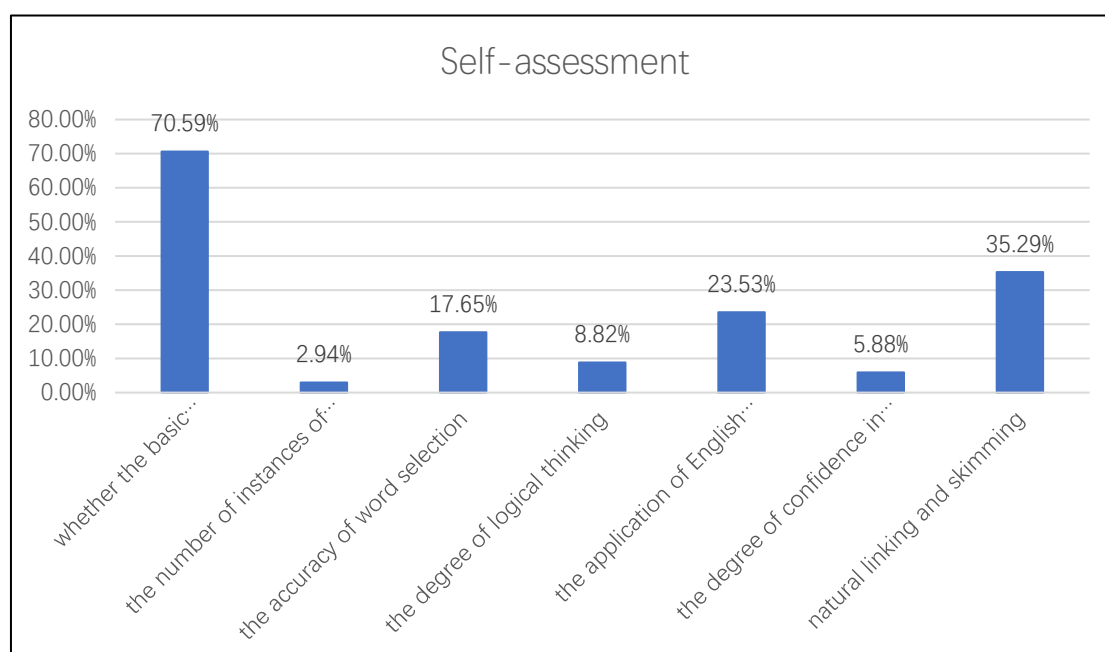


Figure 1. Shows that about 70% of college students think their English phoneme

pronunciation is basically correct, which shows that phoneme basic education plays a certain role. In spite of this, most of the vowels are not full and consonants are in wrong positions. Only a few college students think that their oral English expression is less, which shows that college students practice oral English less times, can not express their ideas in English coherently. Most college students unconsciously add pet phrases, such as “er” and “um”, resulting in incoherence and displaying a lack of self-confidence. Most college students do not have much confidence in their oral English ability and logical thinking in English. About a third of college students think they can link and reduce naturally, which is related to the teaching of linking when consonants and vowels appear side by side in college.

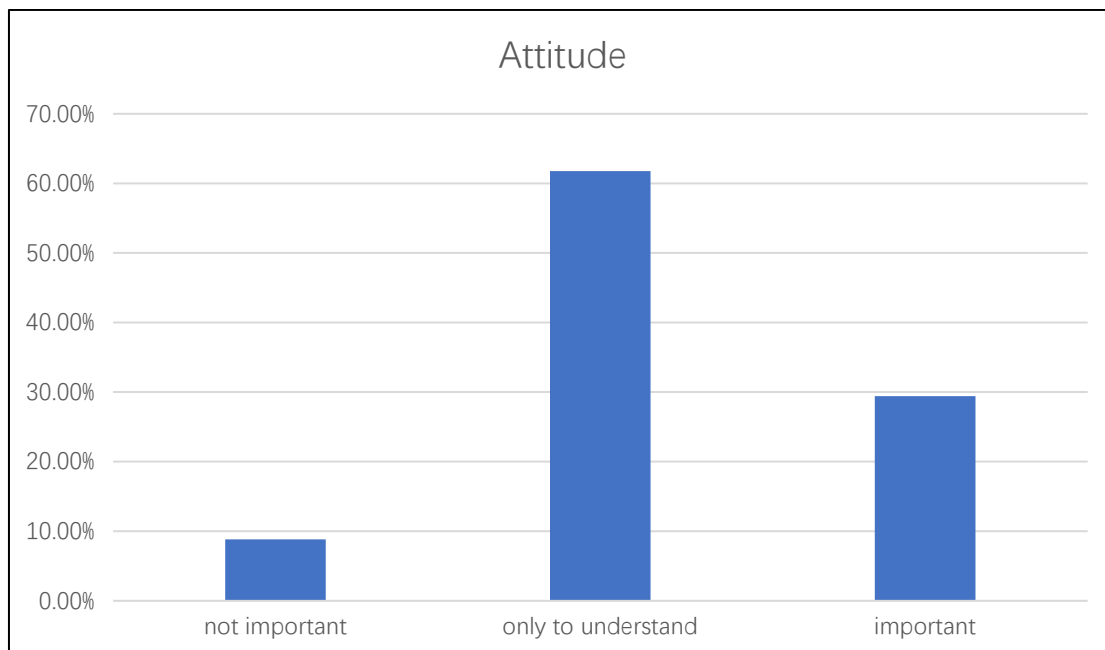


Figure 2. Attitude

Figure 2 shows that nearly two thirds of college students think it is necessary to understand spoken English. After all, pronunciation will affect other aspects of English learning. Less than 10% of college students think it is not important, because exam-oriented exams are generally not needed. Nearly 30% of college students think oral English is important and will take the initiative to practice. This shows that only a small number of college students think that oral English is not important, and the vast majority of college students think that oral English will have an impact on them in the future, but they only stay at the level of “understanding”. Only about one third of college students think spoken English is important.

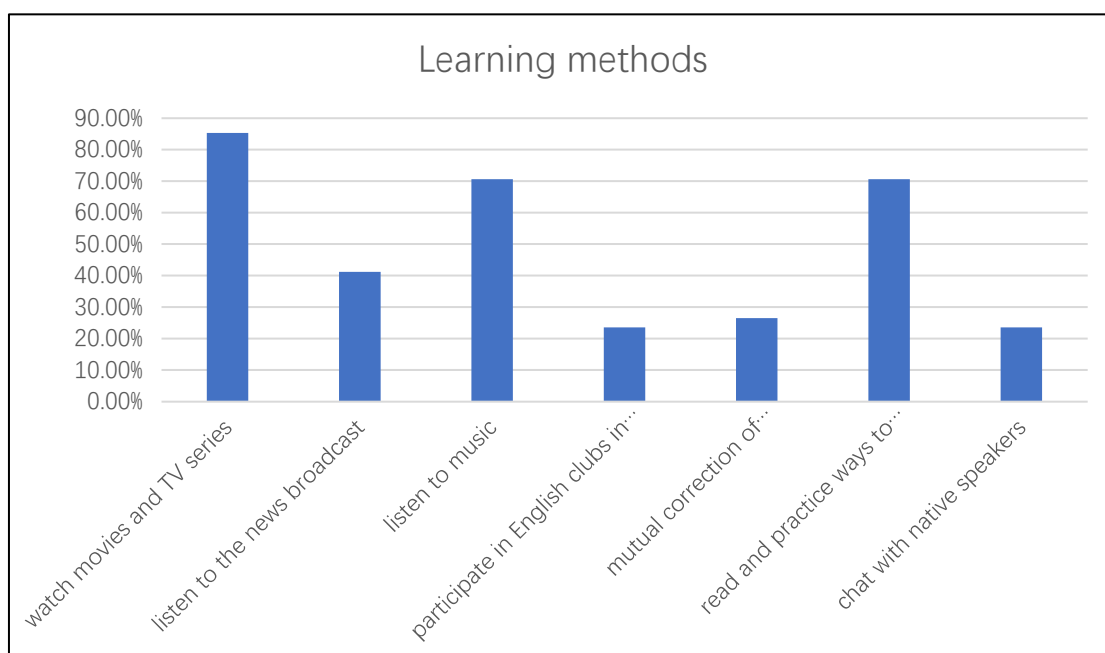


Figure 3. Learning methods

Figure 3 shows that vast majority of college students can watch movies and TV series, listen to the news broadcast and music and read and practice ways to practice spoken English in English

class, but mutual correction of pronunciation and common practice of college students is relatively small. This shows that most participants are willing to practice English either through self-study or under the guidance of teachers, but less willing to take the initiative to communicate in English. Many college students are afraid of being laughed at by others for having an accent, so they try to avoid speaking English in public (Peng Yanhong, 2006:63). The smallest group is the number of college students who communicate with native speakers and participate in English clubs in universities, indicating that subjects have certain resistance to unfamiliar people or foreigners. The emphasis on language forms and the neglect of communicative content reflects the weak communicative competence of students (Chen Liping, 2007:61).

3. Analysis and Discussion

The above results show that there are some reasons for the low level of spoken English of contemporary college students in China, including the following:

3.1. The Current Situation of College Students' Oral English

1. There is a big difference between English and Chinese pronunciation

English belongs to the Germanic family of the Indo-European language family, while Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. They differ greatly in written form and oral expression. Most college students unconsciously bring their mother tongue habits into English pronunciation practice or actual English conversation, resulting in "Chinglish". The pronunciation of native English speakers is generally three-dimensional, which is difficult for Chinese college students who are accustomed to Chinese to achieve accurate English pronunciation.

2. Speaking is a small part of the exam

According to Figure 2, a small number of college students think that oral English is not important, and most of them only think that oral English is "for understanding only". The "weak position" of oral expression can be reflected in the following aspects: First, oral tests are rarely required in compulsory education exams in mainland China, which results in many students not paying attention to oral learning. Second, when many parents take their children to English remedial classes, they tend to focus on reading and writing and neglect the cultivation of oral English ability. Finally, when setting up curriculum and teaching activities, schools and teachers tend to focus on written ability and ignore oral English, resulting that students under the pressure of compulsory learning can only passively learn English from books, where slang learning and practice are insufficient.

3. Students are not getting enough effective feedback

Although many modern English speeches and other film and television materials are available, they are only one-way signal transmission, and students can only imitate one-way. When they are in a real English dialogue environment, they rarely get timely feedback from native English speakers. Some pronunciation or word choice mistakes are made without being corrected, so the original problems still exist. Even if teachers can lead the reading or correct students' mistakes in class, most of them are not native English speakers, and inevitably have some pronunciation problems. Moreover, English classes in universities are generally in large classes, so teachers cannot accurately point out each sentence for each student, which is also reflected in Figure 3.

To sum up, contemporary college students' oral English level is affected by many factors, mainly including the large gap between English and Chinese pronunciation, the small proportion of oral English in the examination, and the insufficient effective feedback students get. Based on these findings, this paper puts forward the corresponding solutions.

3.2. Coping Strategies

1. Increase the cultivation of basic knowledge and correct phoneme errors

The 44 English phonemes are the foundation, and the precision of details can effectively drive the perfection of the whole. Students can first use the teaching materials of single phonemes on the Internet to grasp every single phoneme for practice, and put it into familiar words for spelling. Through special training in basic knowledge such as phonetics, students can have a deeper understanding of known words and lay a solid foundation for contacting new words in the future.

2. Break down vocabulary and improve reading skills

Students can try to break up each sentence they come across in the passage, and underline the places where they need to link the consonants and vowels. Intensity and difficulty can be gradually increased, otherwise it will backfire and add unnecessary anxiety.

3. Shadow read and imitate, gradually from shallow to deep

The pronunciation of native English speakers is very important for oral English learning. Students can carefully observe their mouth movements and imitate them. Correct simple words first, then try longer articles.

4. Ask others politely to simulate English conversations

In view of the phenomenon of "mute English", first, college students can consult foreigners on campus and improve the accuracy of their oral English by learning from native speakers. The so-called "dumb English" is rooted in the lack of practice. Language needs to be constantly used in order to gradually internalize it. College students can make a study plan for themselves and practice English expression regularly and quantitatively everyday. Record daily contact and actively participate in real English conversation practice. By listening to recorded sessions, and checking for gaps and uncertain expression, students can use a variety of ways to consult the teacher to confirm and improve.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper conducted a survey of the subjects' oral English learning levels through questionnaires and voice interviews. It is found that there are several reasons for the low level of spoken English among college students: the large gap between English and Chinese pronunciation, the lack of emphasis on spoken English in the examination, and the insufficiently effective feedback students get. Based on these findings, this paper puts forward corresponding solutions, including: increasing basic knowledge cultivation, correcting phoneme errors; breaking down vocabulary and improving reading skills; imitation followed by shadowing, gradually from shallow to deep; and politely asking others to participate in simulated English conversations. This study will help to improve college students' oral English level and enhance their learning confidence. In addition, there are still many deficiencies in the study of contemporary college students' oral English learning, and some learning methods are not covered in this paper, which still need further research.

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