A Qualitative Study on Oral Expression Ability of Chinese English Postgraduates: Cognitive Process and Communication Strategies

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Abstract: The present study employed a qualitative design to investigate Chinese English postgraduates' cognitive process and communication strategies during the English speaking process. An IELETS speaking test simulation was offered to 3 English graduates who have passed TEM8. The simulation involved 3 parts with different topics and difficulty, and the outcome was assessed by an IELETS speaking test criteria. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the test results, an interview was conducted. The findings revealed that English graduates' oral expression is problematic in many aspects such as fluency and coherence, and that students with different cognitive process are likely to adopt various communicative strategies to complete communication.
Keywords: Oral expression; Communication strategy; Cognitive process

1. Introduction

Little justification is needed for the fact that speaking plays an essential part in second language acquisition (SLA). Oral English is a straightforward way which manifests students' English learning outcome. Although Chinese students have been studying English since primary school, most of them fails to meet expectations in oral English ability in accordance to China's Standards of English Language Ability, part with a lack of English speaking environment or inefficiency in learning English[1] [2]. Over the past decade there has been an increased emphasis on exploring the potential factors that affect students' oral English performance. It has been found that students' oral expression is correlated with the use of chunks, topic familiarity, task complexity and working memory. However, as the process of speaking English is a cognitive thinking process, there has been a paucity of research investigating the students' current oral expression ability from the perspective of cognitive process and communicative strategies[3]. Moreover, past research focuses immensely on college students' oral English ability, seldom studies shed light on the oral performance of English major graduates, who should be advanced English learners. Therefore, it will be meaningful to take graduates as samples.

This study is intended to address this gap by investigating English postgraduates' oral English performance by a simulation of IELTS speaking test and exploring their cognitive process and communicative strategies they are likely to utilize in communication.

2. Background

L2 production is a major area of interest within the field of psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics and second language acquisition[4]. In previous studies, researchers have investigated many factors that could influence the students' oral English. Wang Lifei contrasted the discourse makers in Chinese students' spoken English and that of native speakers[5]. He found that Chinese students are less likely to use markers in speaking, which make them sound less idiomatic and not fluent or accurate. Seth Amoah and Joyce Yeboah investigated the difficulties and motivation towards Chinese EFL learners by observing non- English major students in the foreign language department of Nanjing Tech University[6]. Since 2000, many researchers have been focusing on teaching strategies of college students' speaking performance. It is found that the teaching of oral communication strategies can increase the frequency of strategy use, improve the strategy competence, and promote the fluency of oral expression.

However, up to now, far too little attention has been paid to students' cognitive process and communication strategies they often use in speaking and these studies hardly focuses on the intonation and rhythm in English speaking. Knowing students' cognitive process is helpful to overcome their weakness and better understand their inefficiency in oral expression in a fundamental way. Moreover, that will make it easier for teachers to give suggestions on what kind of strategies they can use with different types of cognitive process.

According to Seliger, second language learners can be divided into planners who consider sentences beforehand before speaking and

correctors who speak promptly what they think and revise their speech during communication[7]. Planners are hesitant in the speed of speaking, but their frequency of speaking errors will reduce significantly. Whereas correctors speak fluently with less pauses in speech, but they will make more mistakes than planners. As for communication strategies, according to Rod Ellis, communication strategies was coined by Larry Selinker in his account of the processes responsible for interlanguage[8]. Although scholars have problems in its definition, here this paper will be grounded on the basic concepts: learners are conscious when they use strategies; it is problem oriented which means that communication strategies are a way for learners to express what they want to say in the absence of certain knowledge or linguistic resources.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

As discussed previously, existing research into oral expression has largely focused on teaching strategies like chunks and corpus but has rarely addressed students' cognition process and communication strategies in speaking process. It is of benefit to investigate the students' cognitive characteristics and communication strategies in order to find rules and more effective teaching and learning strategies for both teachers and students. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following three research questions:

1. How is the English postgraduates' performance?

2. What communication strategies does the students employ?

3. What are the students' cognitive process?

4. What are the students' attitudes towards English speaking?

3.2 Participants

Three first-grade English major postgraduates participated in this study. They have been learning English as a foreign language since third grade in primary school and none of them have ever studied abroad. The age of the participants (3 females) ranged from 22 to 24 (M = 23). Prior to the experiment, they took part in TEM8, and all participants passed this exam, which meant that they have possessed a good command of English translating, listening, reading and writing skills. According to China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), English majors are in the seventh level which indicates that they can engage in in-depth discussion and exchange with others on a range of related academic and social topics; they can effectively describe, clarify, explain, justify, and comment on such matters and express him/herself clearly, appropriately, smoothly, and in a conventional manner.

3.3 Instruments and Procedure

The research took place in a classroom where a simulation of IELTS speaking test was used to test subjects' English speaking performance. The reason that choosing IELTS test is that it is one of the famous international standardized English proficiency tests and it has been recognized by multiple countries and regions around the world[9]. The IELTS speaking test is intended to test participants' ability to communicate fluently in a real language environment. It mainly tests the fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical use, and pronunciation of candidates' spoken language and the subjects' speaking performance will also be measured via this criteria. Fluency and coherence refer to a candidate's ability to speak at length, without repetition and self-correction, to maintain flow of speech without pauses or hesitations and use a range of connectors and discourse makers. Lexical resource mainly tests the ability of candidates to use a range of vocabulary, paraphrasing, and less common vocabulary, idioms and collocations. Grammatical range and accuracy consists of using a range of sentence structures, grammatical tenses and forms and produce error-free sentences. And the pronunciation contains the following criteria: being understood throughout; pronouncing words and sounds accurately; pronouncing syllables and words stress correctly; using sentence stress and intonation effectively. The test consisted of 3 parts with varied topics: home, music and relaxation and there were 11 items in total. Before the test, the participants were informed the topics and some basic information of IELTS speaking test include the introduction to the three different parts and they were given 5 minutes if they wanted to prepare.

After the test, the students were interviewed to elicit the students' reflections on their performance and attitudes towards speaking. To avoid misunderstanding and probe deeper about the participants' thought, the interview was conducted in Chinese. The simulation of IELETS and the semi-structured interview were both audio-recorded and then transcribed on computer. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Research question 1: How is the students' performance?

The subjects' performance was measured by fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical use and pronunciation. According to the result of the simulation, in part one, which consisted of simple and general questions, the subjects paused at least three times in a short sentence, using "uhm". In some questions, one subject became silent after she answered "Yes" and they can not speak at length. And the sub-

jects sometimes spoke slowly because they were hesitant to choose words and often repeated their words. For example, when asked "What kind of music do you enjoy?", subject one replied "I enjoy...uhm... a lot of kinds of music like...uhm... I like jazz, ...uhm... hip hop, ...uhm... and some classic.. classical music." with four pauses and did not give any reason to support her opinion. Moreover, they seldom used transitional language such as "however", "by contrast" to make them sound more fluent and coherent.

In terms of lexical resource, the subjects frequently repeated the words from the question instead of saying them in a different way. Moreover, then tended to use the same content words and sentence patterns again and again. For example, when asked " What are the benefits of doing exercise?", the subject replied "... it's beneficial for us to have a healthy body, ...uhm... which is *good* for us to... stay away from illness and have a *good*, *good* state, *good* condition to face everyday's life." What is more, when asked "What..you don't enjoy", "Do you..live there..?", all the participants would answer by using the same verb as the question without any change.

These subjects' grammar accuracy was not very problematic part with their frequent usage of simple sentences. Nonetheless, there were still some errors such as tense inconsistency and forgetting some prepositions. For instance, some subjects answered "so I may *choose live* in other places", "For example, ...uhm... at the beginning of this year, I had a small surgery, ...uhm... and...uhm... I *have*...uhm... a lot of time to stay at home alone...uhm... at that time", "I don't enjoy the music *that's makes* me feel *more uncomfortable* such as the music...uhm... that is more that is more noisy...uhm... because this music can make me feel upset or make me...uhm... not enjoy my peaceful life." and "I will *listen* some music that makes me *more happy...*".

As for pronunciation, all participants can be understood but some of the words were pronounced incorrectly. For example, the word "jazz" was wrongly pronounced as "jeans" and "pressure" as "precious". Furthermore, all of them had problem in sentence stress, phrasing and more important, their intonation was flat.

To conclude, via the results of the speaking simulation test, their performance fails to meet expectancy in accordance to China's Standard of English Ability which considers English major in the seventh level. According to their own reflection in interview, they are also not satisfied with their oral expression ability.

4.2 Research question 2: What communication strategies does the students employ?

According to the results of simulation and interview data, the subjects adopted following communicative strategies:

4.2.1 Retrieval

Krashen posed the phenomenon of "language sense in the mind" which refers to that after 1-2 hours of language input, second language learners will establish language sense[10]. However, this sense of language will fade gradually in a few days. When speakers communicate, what they say is retrieved from mind. Some subjects have mentioned that they have not practiced speaking English for a long time and so they had some difficulty in retrieving some vocabulary and sentence patterns. For example, one of the subjects said " I have not memorized words for a few month and I have problem in thinking of appropriate words." The subjects were not fluent can part be explained by their lack of "language sense".

4.2.2 Monitor

The three subjects stated that they sometimes knew they have made some mistakes in speaking. It manifests that they were unconsciously controlling their speech act by monitor. Subject 3 said that " I know I make mistakes the moment I say, and sometimes I will repeat and correct myself, but sometimes I will just let it go because correction will influence my fluency and logic." From their performance, it can be seen that all of them paid more attention to meaning rather than grammar because the frequency that they corrected themselves in words were higher than that of grammar mistakes. They are more likely to ignore the grammar mistakes and focus on what they want to express.

4.2.3 Omission

In this study, omission often happens in unfamiliar topics. In the music related questions, when asked "What kind of music do you enjoy?", the subject one knew little about music but she did not know how to explain so she invented that "I like jazz, ...uhm... hip hop...uhm... and some classic... classical music." However, she said that "I have never listened to these kinds of music before and I only know these terms." in interview.

4.2.4 Substitution

When asked "Is there any kind of music that you don't enjoy very much?", subject two wanted to express that she did not like blue music, but she did not know how to say that, so she used "sad music" and when she wanted to express that she liked music that made people relaxing, but she still found it difficult to express, so she said "smoothing music" instead. However, there is no such term of music at all.

When subject three answered the same question, she said "I don't enjoy the music that's makes me feel more uncomfortable such as

the music...uhm... that is more... that is more noisy...uhm... because this music can make me feel upset or make me...uhm... not enjoy my peaceful life."

According to the subject three, she had no idea how to express "noisy music" with musical terms, so she just said "noisy music" tentatively, and as for the last phrase "enjoy my peaceful life", she knew that it sounded strange but she did not know how to express appropriately and she thought that it can be understood too.

4.3 Research question 3: What are the students' cognitive process?

According to the interview, after the subjects were informed the topic, all of them would try to predict the questions, which manifests the metacognition as they used the strategy of planning. However, two of them did not think about the exact expressions such as words and sentence patterns. What they actually said was grounded on the specific questions. They said like "I just say whatever comes into my head." and "I use whatever pops up in my mind". Only one student would plan part of what to say "Half half I think. Half of my expression is prepared beforehand, the other is from the impulse of the moment." Moreover, according to their performance and reflection, their oral expression such as lexical resource and coherency is better in the topic of hometown than that of music because they are familiar with the former one. Therefore, the results of metacognitive strategies are relevant to the familiarity towards the topic.

Moreover, the language the subjects use in the process of thinking and planning has two types: think in English and speak in English; think in first language and translate them in English. All of the subjects spoke to themselves in Chinese when they encountered difficulty in communication. Two subject stated that they thought in English and one subject said that she would think in Chinese first and then translated them into English.

From the cognition perspective, all of them belong to correctors who speak whatever occurs to their mind straightforward and correct themselves during the communication. There are some examples can prove this:

"And also...uhm... doing exercise is conducive for us to foster a good habits, a good habit."

"When I was a child, I like to..I like to lie..lie in the sofa and play with my... played with my sister".

4.4 Research Question 4: What are the students' attitudes to English speaking?

According to the interview, the three subjects are not motivated to learn spoken English. They mentioned that it is hard to make progress because they are also not good at pronunciation, logic and idiomatic expression and thus they do not have confidence they can make a difference. On the other hand, although in interview they lay emphasis on spoken English, they do not make a special effort at it because they "do not have chance to communicate with native speakers at all". Moreover, Since primary school, they have realized that grades are the most important and unfortunately, speaking ability is not tested in exams.

5. Limitation

This study has potential limitations. First, there is only one judge to analyze and categorize the participants' oral materials according to the standard. The analysis may be not accurate. Another limitation of this study is the sample size and participant demographics. Since this was a convenience sample, it was not possible to have a 50-50 breakdown between males and females, and the ages of the participants were also very similar. That is to say, the finding of the research may have limited generalizbility. Future studies with a larger sample size and including a more diverse pool of participants might give additional insights into some of this study's findings.

One additional possible limitation connects to the way in which the data were collected for the study. As the participants were familiar with the author, they were not very serious during the simulation. Their performance might be better if they were in a real test. That is to say, the simulation is hardly a proper way to collect their data and a more appropriate way should be considered in the future.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the present study are threefold. Firstly, students' first language will exert influence on their oral expression ability. What they say has undergone thinking and selection both in Chinese and English. Therefore, their fluency and accuracy will be affected. The key to improve this kind of students' fluency and accuracy is get rid of the impact of first language. Although some of them think in English directly, their input is still not large enough to make them sound fluent and accurate.

Secondly, the qualitative results have manifested that there are several communicative strategies the three English major graduates adopted during English communication. They can be summarized into four categories: retrieval, monitor, omission and substitution. This classification can help us gain a deeper understanding of communicative strategies systematically.

Thirdly, the subjects are terrible at logic and organization. Students who belong to correctors will speak whatever comes to their mind. However, if they do not have any idea about a topic, they will be speechless or incomprehensible. Moreover, it is found that in conversations, there is often a phenomenon where the speakers are not familiar with the topics, and thus they often get stuck or repeat a sentence and even

being silent due to language proficiency. The occurrence of the above situations in this survey has increased the difficulty to measure the oral expression ability of the subjects.

There is a long way to go to enhance L2 students' oral expression ability. In the teaching process, it is advisable that teachers pay more attention to the students' cognitive process and communicative strategies and help students learn more about strategies they can use in communication.

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