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Analysis of Perceived Difficulty Rank of English Skills of College Students in China

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Abstract

A widely known fact of English education in China is that after years of learning, most Chinese students still can not speak English or understand spoken English. This phenomenon is called "mute English" in China's academic community, a phenomenon that has been frustrating both English instructors and learners ever since English was listed a compulsory subject in high schools and mandatory course in universities in China years ago. "Mute English" or "English mute" is due to many factors, which would require more than one study and constant research efforts to arrive at a full understanding. This study analyzed the perceived difficulty rank of five English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating in the hope of discovering the relationships among these skills to find out how these skills interact with each other, thus providing some hints on improving China's current English teaching approaches and reducing the mute English phenomena.

Data analysis shows that of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, Chinese students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills to command, whereas reading is perceived the least difficult one. However, no significant difference is found between translating and speaking between English majors and none majors. Such perception differences in these English skills alert us that we need to restructure our design teaching approaches and course contents for an effective teaching approach of oral English in China and to reach the ultimate goal of the application of foreign language learning.

Key words: English learning; Foreign language

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INTRODUCTION

Although English is now the most frequently used foreign language in the world, and it is taught as a foreign language in almost every school in every country, most of Chinese English learners are learning English solely for the purpose of passing various kinds of examinations required in the country for all kinds of purposes (Liu & Liu, 2005; Nie, 1999). Chinese students' inability of English language skills and the huge amount of time involved in learning this foreign language has long been frowned upon by Chinese scholars and educators. However, the discouraging situation is still continuing.

Generally speaking, Chinese students spent more than fifteen years learning English from high school to university only to find they themselves in the end either mute or deaf in this language. Many scholars or researchers (Bambacas & Sanderson, 2011; Jin, 2012; Tong, 2011) hold that Chinese people are shy when speaking foreign languages. Whereas this can be true sometimes and for some people, most of the Chinese English learners do not have oral ability in English no matter how many years they have studied it willy-nilly. English education in China has not produced the anticipated language proficiency among the learners. It is not a surprise to find a PhD holder trained in China not being able to speak as communicable English as are the unskilled laborers in India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh.

The basic function of a language is its conversational function (Ren, 2004; Zhou, 2000). The fact that after many years of learning, many Chinese learners are still not able to speak the language (Dai, 2001) alerted us

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that something has been wrong in English teaching in this country which has the largest population of English learners in the world, and the market and learning need for this foreign language in China have been generating billions of dollar business for publishers, training centers, and government examination centers. It is definitely not at all a stereotype that Chinese cannot or don't speak English.

Such a status quo not only reflects the failure in effective learning from students' perspective but also a failure in teaching from the teachers' perspective. English teaching practice in China has never fully satisfied educators, teachers, or students (Luo, 2012). However, English learning in China is a huge market (Li & Moreira, 2009) for publishers and text book writers because English tests are widely conducted for multiple purposes everyday in this country, thus there is a constant need for textbooks and review materials of various levels and types. In China, English proficiency is manifested more by a certificate obtained through examinations or tests than the physical ability of speaking, writing or listening to this language. It is no surprise to find college professors or even PhD student supervisors in the field of English language, American literature, or linguistics, who cannot speak English or even voice English sounds properly (Peng, 2000). The importance of the applicability of English language in China has been downplayed, neglected or even ignored. Such a situation has led the learning process to become a process to pass examinations or to obtain certificates by the marginal level based on rote learning or memorization.

Obviously, English learning or rather, any foreign language learning is a process of acquiring or developing all the linguistic skills for communication purpose (Allah, 2012). Learners should develop an overall ability of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating (Zhang, 2010). These skills are interrelated or symbiotic (Zhang, Liu, 2006; Tavil, 2010), for example, "Those who cannot speak English most probably cannot understand spoken English either" (Wang, 2010, p.18). This proves that a balanced development of English skills is very important. The proficiency of English skills are affected by a number of factors, and different learners need different time frames to command different English skills depending on their perceptions of the difficulty level of each skill and their learning styles (Tsai, 2012). The learning idiosyncrasy is another important element that affects acquisition of English skills (Feng, 1995; Wu, 1997). Therefore, a study on learner's perception of difficulty rank order of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating can help us better understand the interwoven relationship and interaction among these skills, thus providing us with some clues to enhance the English teaching quality and advise our students on how to adopt the most appropriate learning strategies to maximize their learning effectiveness and to produce their English application capability, particularly conversational ability.

This study attempts to rank order the difficulty levels of five English skills among Chinese college students, using non-parametric techniques in the hope of identifying how these skills are interrelated in Chinese learners' context and exploring the possibility of finding an effective teaching approach based on students' perception of English skills as well as introducing a trend of new research methods into China's research on English learning.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The National English Curriculum of China clearly lists specific requirements for listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills. However, the practice of English teaching in China over the past decades shows that those skills have not yet been developed well enough to match the huge amount of efforts and time Chinese learners have been spending on this most useful language in the world. After at least 16 years of systematic learning of English in classrooms, most college students still cannot communicate in or speak English (Zhang, 1999). This is what is called the "mute English" (Wang, 2010), a very frustrating learning outcome that has been talked about nationwide for years. Although scholars (Hu & Fu, 2007; Jin, 2007) in China have proposed different teaching approaches targeting to reduce "mute English", the goal has been far from being reached. It is quite easy to discover "Mute English" among Chinese learners. Today we can hardly find any Chinese who has never learned English for some years in his or her life, but we can easily discover the "mute English" by asking simple questions in English to or trying to start a short conversation in English with randomly selected Chinese people in the street or with sales assistants in any stores. "Mute English" is not an isolated language phenomenon. Cai (2005) held,

> A good reader of English does not necessarily have good listening comprehension ability. S/he can be mute or deaf in English. Conversely, a good listener or speaker usually has good reading ability. A learner with excellent listening comprehension ability is also able to read and write well. We do not need to worry about such learner to become mute or deaf for English (p.84).

We understand that different English skills correlate with each other in one way or another, and the perceived difficulty levels of these skills and learner's interest in any of these skills are not the same. For example, some learners may like reading more than speaking, whereas others may likes translating more than listening, thus the acquisition strategies or styles of each skill is naturally not the same for all different learners (e.g., Zokaee, Zaferanieh, & Naseri, 2012).

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Li (2007) discovered that among the five English skills, "57.5% of the Chinese students perceive listening comprehension (listening and reading) is much easier than self-expression (speaking and writing)" (p.51). Hua (2003) investigated the perceived difficulty levels of English skills among 290 students of five different college majors in China. She discovered that 49% of the students perceive speaking the most difficult, whereas 45.9% of the students perceive listening comprehension the most difficult. But Hua did not conduct the necessary inferential analysis, thus we are not even sure if these results appeared only by chance. From our own teaching experience and observation, it is not hard to find out the differences in perceived difficulties for different English skills among English learners, but to understand the implications of these differences we then need to conduct deep investigations because a good knowledge of these differences can help us design more effective teaching strategies and extracurricular plans to raise the awareness of the significance of oral English teaching and to improve the teaching strategies of the instructors so that "mute English" may be gradually reduced.

Over the past decades, a plethora of studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of foreign language teaching in China (e.g., Wang, 2010). Scholars in China and overseas have produced some significant research results. Quite a number of scholars in China proposed different approaches, opinions, and teaching strategies for the acquisition of English skills. For example, Wu (2008) discovered that English teaching approach in high schools has an impact on the confidence in foreign language acquisition in the university. Yin and Miao (2008) proposed that classroom management approach for oral English ability cultivation. They believed that group activity can increase the practice opportunity and reduce learning anxiety. Yalcinkaya, Multuk, and Sahin (2009) discovered the significant correlation between listening and writing (r=0.814). Furthermore, Tian and Tian (2010) found out significant correlations between listening and reading as well as between listening and writing. Yuan and Chu (2001) also discovered that writing could help improve oral examination score. These studies indicate that none of the listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills can be acquired independently. In addition, Tavil (2010) found that listening and speaking training are more effective than independent listening training or speaking training. Nation (2006) identified close relationships between vocabulary and listening comprehension, e.g., students would have to command a vocabulary of 6000-7000 words in order to understand 98% of a spoken text. Finally, translation skill is also closely related with other skills. Oral English is related with interpretation; Translation is related with writing and reading.

Many scholars in China have conducted research on how to improve the acquiring effect of English skills. For example, Huang and Gu (1996) studied how teaching approaches can enhance learning effects. Chen (2007) approached the learning effectiveness through the perspective of textbook structure and usage. Zhou, Gao, and Zhang (2011) explored the learning motivation, and Huo and Huo (2001) studied the learning anxiety of Chinese students. Regardless of all these efforts, we still lack sufficient knowledge of the relationships between the five English skills, and our knowledge of the role that such relationships and the learner's personality may play in the process of English skill acquisition is also skin-deep.

Of the limited studies in the literature, Huo, Wang, and Yu (2010) found out through multiple regression that perceived difficulty rank of English skills can influence learner's examination scores. However, they did not operationalize the difficulty rank of these English skills, thus making their research results vulnerable. Obviously, if we can conduct rigorous research on the relationships between perceived difficulty rank of English skills and the acquisition effects, we may be able to produce more effective teaching plan that result in less mute or deaf English learners.

Recently, Arkin (2010) studied the perceived difficulty rank of English skills. He requested students to rank order the required skills in different courses. For example, he requested students to rank order the speaking skills in class discussion, presentation, and one-to-one conversation. He discovered the shorter the course time, the more difficult the students will find the skill to acquire. The knowledge of how difficult students perceive the English skills can help instructors design more effective teaching methodology with a focus on specific problems or learning obstacles students may have, resulting in more effective skill acquisition.

This study comparatively investigates how difficult English major and non-major students in China perceive listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills. It is hoped that the results of this study can help to provide some operational and orientation clues for English instructors and researchers in China to produce effective curriculum design targeting the reduction or remedial of the prevailing learning outcome of "mute English".

2. METHOD

This study investigated 200 universities students in Mainland China, of whom 100 are English majors and 100 are non-majors. Students were required to choose from a scale of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 to rank order the difficult levels of five English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. "1" presents the least difficult,

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whereas "5" represents the most difficult. A series of non-parametric tests were applied for data analysis, including Friedman test for three or more samples, Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, and Mann-Whitney U test for two unrelated samples. Friedman test was to find out if there were differences between the rank order of difficulty across listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills. Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was to find out the location of any possible difference as identified by Friendman test because the later does not provide post hoc test. Finally, Mann-Whitney U test for two unrelated samples was to find out if there was significant difference between English major and non-major students across the five skills.

3. RESULTS ANALYSES

The results of data analysis are presented in the following Tables.

Table 1
Results of Friedman Test for Three or More Samples

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Translating
Mean rank	3.23	3.57	1.75	2.77	3.68
Median	3	3	1	2	4
χ^2=481.418		df=4		Sig.000	

Freidman test discovered that there are significant differences across listening (L), speaking (S), reading(R), writing (W), and translating (T). Since the probability of type I error increases in Wilccoxon test, the probability level has to be adjusted through Bonferroni test. This is done by dividing the chosen significant level with the number of comparison to be conducted. Thus the adjusted significant level is 0.05/10=0.005. Results of Wilcoxon test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test

	L/S	L/R	L/W	L/T	R/S	W/S	T/S	W/R	T/R	T/W
Z	-4.49	-13.39	-4.45	-5.18	-15.0	-7.93	-1.23	-11.5	-15.6	-10.2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.219	.000	.000	.000

The above results indicate significant difference across all pairs of skills except translating and speaking. Based on these results, we conclude that the level of difficulty of the five English skills from easy to difficult is reading, writing, listening, speaking/translating

The results of Mann-Whitney *U* test for English major students and non-major students are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Results of Mann-Whitney U test for Two Unrelated Samples

	Eng-Major	Non-major	Mann-Whitney *U*	Wilcoxon *W*	Sig.
Listening	231.43	214.07	2.017	3.018	0.177
Speaking	221.25	234.81	2.047	6.837	0.289
Reading	219.16	241.04	1.973	6.794	0.071
Writing	225.67	226.73	2.175	6.996	0.934
Translating	225.62	160.89	1.267	2.268	0.000

With the exception of translating, English major and non-major students have the same perception of difficulty level across the five English skills.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide us with some significant clues for foreign language education, particularly English teaching in China. After many years of attempts to restructure the national curriculum of English and to improve the teaching approaches, both English major and non major students still feel that oral English skill is the most difficult skill. This result is consistent with the findings of some Chinese scholars (Hua, 2003; Li, 2007). Cai (2005) argued, "learners who learn English in a non English environment will face more challenges in listening and speaking than in reading and writing." (p.84). Such challenges are due to the lack of natural language

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environment where students can practice their English language skills, particularly oral skills after class. We usually accept that Chinese students are too shy to speak English (Wang, Chao, & Liao, 2011). However, this fact statement is debatable. This study proves that oral skill is the most difficult English language skill for Chinese students. Thus, their reluctance to speak English is more of a skill deficiency than cultural trait.

Given such a situation, the current Chinese college curriculum of English education is still devoid of a focus on developing the oral ability of Chinese students. English education in China has long been understood as examination oriented. Since students seldom have much chance to use English after class, it is not easy to motivate them to learn English. In most cases, they learn to pass the examinations, many of which do not test oral proficiency, especially those for employment purposes. Over the past several decades, English has only been learned in classroom but hardly practiced in real-life or work-related situations, Chinese students do not feel the urgency and importance of developing the oral proficiency during the process of learning English. They learn English because it is a compulsory course or they need to pass the national English examination in order to graduate from the university or to pass the job interview, where the experience of having learned English in the university is considered a selective criterion. To change the situation of "mute English" of Chinese students, or rather Chinese people in general is a very difficult mission, if not impossible.

The current teaching approach of English language in Chinese universities is problematic or defective in many aspects. For example, many of the instructors of oral English course are not orally proficient themselves. Although in Chinese universities, English is the instruction language for English major students, it is not uncommon to see professors with very poor oral English proficiency. Furthermore, professors who cannot speak English at all are still seen in the departments of English or foreign languages in many universities in China. These professors chose to teach courses that justify the use of Chinese or mixed-code (English and Chinese) as instruction language, for example, English-Chinese translation but during the entire course time, they instruct in Chinese. The language proficiency of instructors has a strong impact on students' learning motivation. If students are taught by instructors with poor language proficiency, oral English in particularly, it is not reasonable to expect students to be able to speak fluent English in the end.

To reduce the "mute English" and develop students' ability of the applicability of English skills, particularly the oral skill, universities or departments of English in Chinese universities need to revolutionize the teaching approach, For example, can we design specific teaching approach for a specific group of students given their personality and their perceptions of the difficult levels of language skills based on relevant test results? From the teaching practice in China, we often observe that some students have better oral proficiency, others have better listening comprehension ability, and still others have better translating ability. Do these differences correlate with their perception of the degree of language skill difficulty? If yes, what can we do with these differences to maximize our teaching as well as student learning effectiveness?

This study discovers that most of the students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills. However, Cai (2005) found that students perceived listening and speaking the most important skills, which means the most important skills are the most difficult to acquire. This presents a challenge to our teaching strategy in that student learning effectiveness is even more difficult to achieve than otherwise because listening and speaking in universities are "low level" courses which are more often than not instructed by junior faculty members, and these are the courses that are taught mechanically across China.

On the positive side, this study discloses to us an overall perception of the degrees of difficulty of English skills among university students, thus making it possible for us to adjust the level of difficulty in the course contents and skill training so that students can gradually command the skills. By doing so, we can design a course content and teaching approach that both meet the requirements of the National College English Curriculum and course structure with reasonable degree of difficulty for students with different levels of English proficiency (Yue, 2001).

To change the stereotype that Chinese people are unwilling to speak English (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Liu, 2002) and to prepare our next generation for future challenges, English should no longer be a silent language among Chinese learners. Chinese scholars and English educators need to conduct constant research to find remedial solutions that have been plaguing Chinese English learners for decades, for example, can we find tailor-made appropriate teaching approach for learners with specific perceptions so that they will feel English learning is no more a painful or difficult experience? (Dai, 2001). All in all, foreign language skills acquisition is influenced by many variables. As long as we continue to study these variables, we should be able to find the complex relationship among them as well as the optimal approach for Chinese students.

The results of this study may be more meaningful if multiple regression has been conducted between the perceptions of the degree of difficulty of English skills and the actual proficiencies of all the English skills.

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