Teaching English oral communication for China's English minor undergraduates: Barriers, challenges and options

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This article reports an investigative study of teaching oral English to English minor undergraduates in a university in China. Surveys were administered to twenty-two Chinese English minor undergraduates at the beginning and end of an oral English communication course in 2017. The results show that participants perceived gaps in their vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and in soft skills as barriers to learning oral English. The perceived challenges include developing accuracy and fluency in speaking, having free discussion in English in class, speaking English in a large class, talking on various topics, and maintaining use of English during class. The study found preferences for specific topic areas such as culture, and current affairs; a need for a variety of approaches, including the use of multimedia resources, group and pair work and various speaking practices; more spoken English learning information, resources, practices and activities; and systematic guidance. This study has implications for theory and practice in oral English communication teaching for China as it provides empirical evidence for understanding English minor undergraduates' English oral communication learning.

Keywords: English oral communication; English minor undergraduates; language barriers; challenges; China

Introduction

In teaching oral communication, there are multiple key factors including fluency, pronunciation, interaction and turn-taking (Thornbury, 2011). Grammar is also an important factor which differentiates spoken from written English (Carter & McCarthy, 2017) through the provision of unique linguistic features. Spoken English has also been influenced by new technological developments such as real-time communication platforms and the development of corpora.

In the Chinese context in which the study reported here is set, the Higher Education Institution College English Teaching Advisory Committee has set the following basic requirements for university English oral communication teaching:

> The university students should be able to have simple and multi-rounds of English conversations, make comments on familiar topics, and have simple discussions on the topics related to their study and future job. The language should be clear in structure. The intonation, tone and grammar should meet the basic communicative norms. They should be able to have basic conversation skills. (Higher Education Institution College English Teaching Advisory Committee, 2014, p. 6)

There are also more advanced requirements according to the same document, which require students to acquire oral communicative competence on complex topics and activities, such as conference presentations and sales promotions (Higher Education Institution College English Teaching Advisory Committee, 2014).

Against this background, this article aims to explore the teaching of English oral communication in the Chinese university context by investigating the main barriers and challenges for oral communication skills development; the students' perceptions of oral English communication topics, resources and activities; and the routes for improvement in oral English communication courses. For the purposes of this paper, barriers refer to problems students encounter in the learning process, whereas challenges are the problems they face when attending their oral English classes.

Literature review

Teaching English oral communication

Various approaches have been adopted to develop oral communicative competence. Bailey (2013) reviews the history of methodological development for spoken English teaching and summarizes that the approaches have evolved from the "grammar-translation method, direct method and audiolingualism to communicative language teaching" (p. 16). Studies of approaches to spoken English teaching have been conducted in various contexts. In Australia, Barraja-Rohan (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 479) has used conversation analysis to develop "interactional competence" in oral socialization which is considered a useful approach in second language teaching. In the Japanese context, Talandis and Stout (2015, p. 11) discuss a year-long English speaking intervention featuring "personalized topics, more L1 support, instruction of pragmatic strategies, and frequent speaking assessment" which has resulted in improved oral communicative competence. In Iran, Ebadi and Asakereh (2017) demonstrated that the use of dynamic assessment has positive effects on English speaking skills development. Also in Iran, Rahimi and Zhang (2015), working on teachers' cognition of corrective feedback (CF) reveal that teaching experiences influence the cognition of "types and timing" (p. 111) of CF while novice English teachers are more influenced by their personal English learning experiences.

Previous studies also focus on the factors which influence the cultivation of English-speaking ability. Matsuoka, Matsumoto, Poole, and Matsuoka (2014) found that the social cultural factor could hinder Japanese students' willingness to communicate but students' self-initiated presentation activities could enhance their willingness to communicate in English and their overall speaking abilities. In South Korea, Lee and Lee (2019) discovered that Korean English-majors' and non-English-majors' perceptions of English as an international language could be an important factor influencing their actual communication in multicultural settings. In Iran, Soodmand Afshar and Rahimi (2016) found that there are positive relationships between the speaking ability of EFL students and both reflective thinking and emotional intelligence. The latter was also a stronger predictor of speaking ability development. Sadeghi and Richards (2015), also working in Iran, conducted a survey of 89 English teachers on spoken English teaching, supplemented by interviews and classroom observations. This study recognizes the primary role of the language classroom for learning spoken English and concluded that teachers should have adequate "language proficiency, teaching resources and the appropriate techniques to teach spoken English" (p. 228) and should be attuned with the latest language teaching approaches and concepts. In Romania, Şimon (2014) found that reluctance to speak could constrain the development of English speaking skill and teachers should take measures to encourage students to express their views confidently. In Malaysia, Khatib and Maarof (2015) explored the self-efficacy of English oral communicative competence of students from a technical college and found they generally

have low confidence in their oral communication ability. In Turkey, Soruç and Griffiths (2015) investigated the adoption of spoken grammar in daily communication by 19 students who were preparing for university entrance. Their study found that the usage of spoken grammar is influenced by concerns over identity and they argue that students should be left free to decide whether to adopt the spoken grammar.

Teaching English oral communication in the Chinese university context

In the context of China, oral English communication teaching has been linked with the development of critical thinking skills and communicative competence. Wen (2012) indicates that teaching English oral communication can cultivate students' critical thinking skills. In one experimental study by Y.-H. Wang and Liao (2014, p. 691) in Taiwan, concept mapping techniques used in teaching English oral communication were found effective in developing "higher-order thinking". Yu and Jiang (2008) suggest that the main objective of teaching spoken English should be to develop students' communicative competence whereas Sun (2014) proposes that interactional competence should be added to that goal.

Innovative approaches to teaching oral English communication have been added to conventional approaches such as communicative language teaching (Musumeci, 2009). For example, Sha (2009, p. 269) used the conversation simulation software "Chatterbots" based on AI-based human-to-human interaction. A further example is Chan's (2017) use of workplace transcripts to teach spoken business English.

However, previous studies have also uncovered difficulties and problems in developing oral communication skills. Gan's (2013, p. 244) comparative study of English speaking difficulties experienced by students from Hong Kong and mainland China shows that the speaking skills development of both groups is similarly restrained by lack of "linguistic knowledge, confidence, and failure to see tangible progress". H. S. Wang (2013) reveals that in the Chinese context, the teaching of spoken English has experienced such problems as inadequate professional quality of teachers, lack of English proficiency of students and a lack of proactive language learning environments. In the ethnic minority regions of China, Ge (2007) reveals that oral English teaching and learning are still exam-oriented and there are special difficulties due to the fact that English is students' third language.

Research questions

Despite the considerable research highlighted above, insufficient is known about English minor undergraduates' perceptions of the barriers and challenges they face in in improving their oral English communication skills. To contribute towards filling this gap in the literature, the current study investigates those barriers and challenges within the context of English minor undergraduates in oral English communication learning, and their perceptions of oral English communication teaching in a Chinese university. The study will address three research questions:

1. What do English minor undergraduates in China perceive as the main barriers and challenges to developing spoken English skills?
2. What are the students' perceptions of spoken English teaching topics, activities and resources?
3. What suggestions for improvement are offered by the students based on their experience of completing the course?

Methodology
To answer the research questions both numerical and non-numerical data are required. The data collection and analysis process followed both the quantitative and qualitative conventions (J. D. Brown, 2014). This section describes the data collection procedures, participant profiles and the data analysis steps.

Data Collection
The data collection process was in two stages, each using a survey. The stage one survey (Appendix 1) on oral communication needs analysis was administered in September 2017, at the beginning of the course *Oral English Communication* for English minor students. It contains open-ended questions on participants' preferred topics for the spoken English course, and rating questions for their perceptions of potential teaching resources, activities and the challenges of taking a spoken English course. The questions are based on the work of Sadeghi and Richards (2015) but adapted for the Chinese university context.

The stage two survey (Appendix 2) on English oral communication curriculum assessment was administered in December 2017, at the end of the course. Rating questions were adapted from Nunan (2001) to address participants' preferences for spoken English activities based on their experiences in the course. Open-ended questions were adapted from Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) and Hedge (2002) to gather participants' perceptions and suggestions for course improvement and post-course practice.

The survey instruments were translated into Chinese to facilitate participants' understanding. The translation was read and revised by a senior Chinese researcher. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2011) used a similar approach of translating instruments into the participants' native language. In the current study, participants were free to respond to the open-ended questions in the surveys in either Chinese or English. In keeping with good ethical practice, pseudonyms are used in the study to conceal the identity of the participants.

Participants
This study was conducted in a public university in the east of China, which houses a School of Foreign Studies offering both English major and English minor programmes. The English minor programme consists of courses such as *English Oral Communication*, *English Interpreting*, *Western Culture* and *General English*, all of which were held in the evening or at weekends. This means the participants were making an extra effort to learn English by taking these courses in addition to their compulsory day-time college English courses.

A summary of participants' demographic data is shown in Table 1. There were 22 participants (2 male, 20 female) in the study. They all consented to be participants in the study. Their ages ranged between 19 and 21 years old, with an average age of 19. They were in their second year of university study. They came from a wide range of science and humanities disciplinary areas spanning: Food Science and Engineering, Law, Internet of Things, Chemistry, Nursing, Bioscience, Digital media, Mechanics, International Trade, and Automation.

All of the participants had passed College English Test (CET) Band 4. More than one third had had some spoken English training in various forms such as: an English corner organized by expatriate teachers, a test of English as a Foreign Language spoken English

course in the winter vacation, an *International English Language Test System* summer course or various online courses. However, over two thirds of the participants had not had formal training in spoken English so this may have been their first formal oral English class as a part of the English minor programme. It took some time for them to get used to the oral English communication teaching and learning environment.

Table 1. Participant profiles (N = 22)

Male	2 (9.1%)
Female	20 (90.9%)
Age range	18~21 years old
Average age	19 years old
Pass CET-4	22 (100%)
Previous spoken English training: Yes	7 (31.8%)
No	15 (68.2%)

Participants' self-assessed their spoken English levels at the beginning of the study (Figure 1). More than 40% considered themselves as high beginners and over 27% as beginners. The remainder self-assessed themselves as low intermediate or intermediate learners. Participants expressed a range of motivations for learning spoken English (Figure 2) but predominantly they mentioned improving their spoken English level (72%).
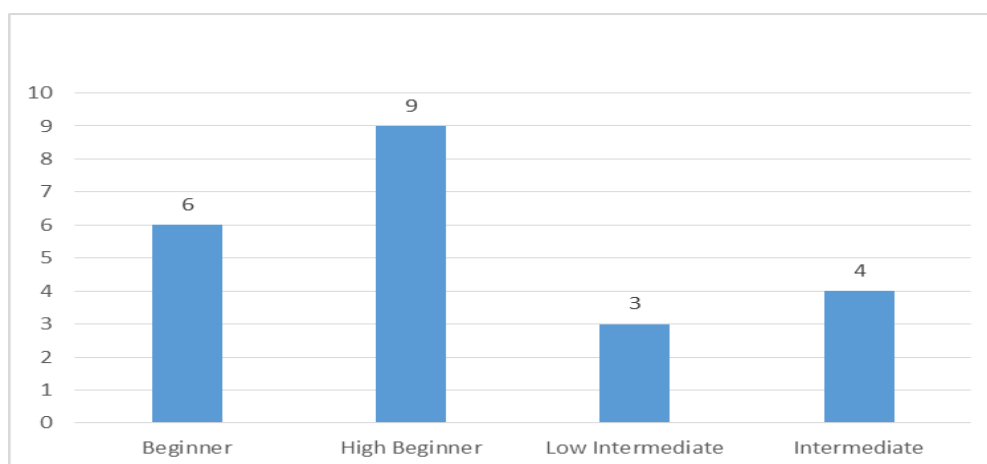

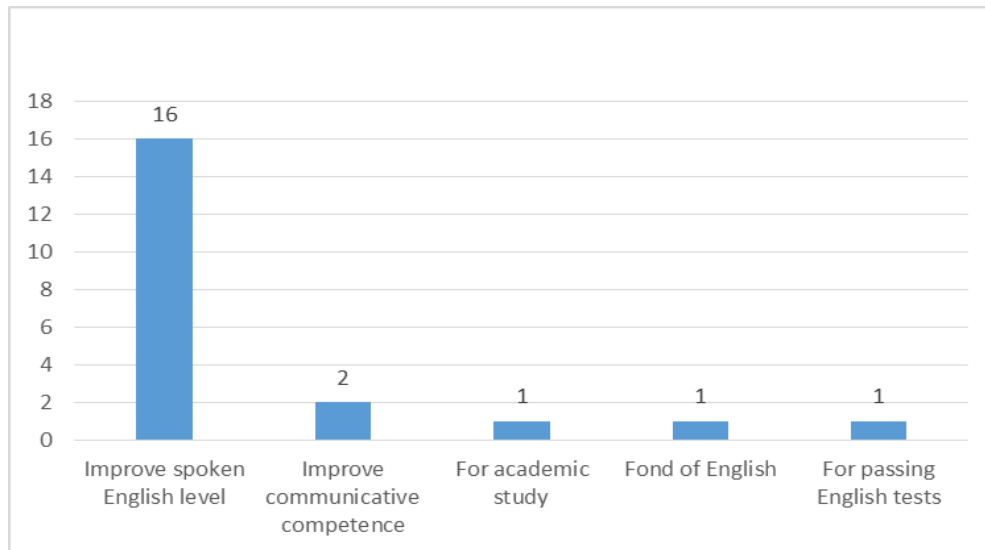Figure 1. Participants' self-assessment of their spoken English levels

Figure 2. Participants' self-reported motivations for learning spoken English
Note: 1 participant declared no motivation

Data analysis

The data was analysed by counting the frequency of themes and the quantity of related responses. For rating questions, the means were calculated. Where participants had responded to open-ended questions in Chinese, their responses were translated into English by the researcher in order to facilitate comparison across all participants. Quotes from the data were selected to represent the most typical perceptions of participants for spoken English teaching (as suggested by Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Results

Barriers and challenges in improving spoken English

The main barriers in improving spoken English
Participants reported six barriers in acquiring spoken English (Figure 3). The most frequently mentioned are inadequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (68.1%). Other barriers ranged between 22% and 13% and consisted of: inadequate confidence to speak (22.7%); inaccurate pronunciation (22.7%); lack of opportunities to practice spoken English (22.7%); inadequate coherence and fluency to follow the speed of speech (13.6%); and lack of partners to practice with (13.6%). Some participants indicated multiple barriers.
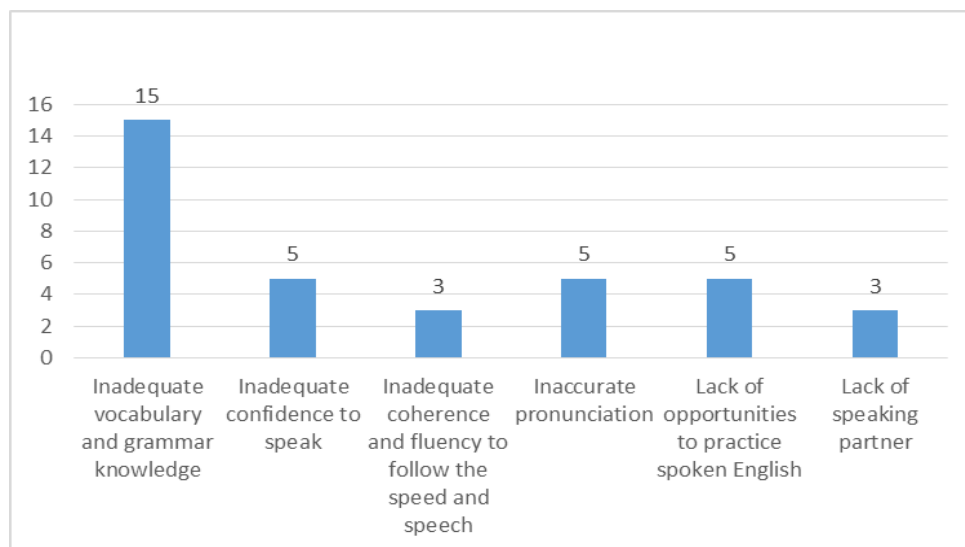
Figure 3. Participants' perceived main barriers in acquiring spoken English
Note: Participants may have chosen more than one barrier in their responses

The main challenges in improving spoken English
The participants' challenges in taking spoken English class varied (Figure 4). They were asked to indicate the level of challenge in a rating scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all challenging while 5 being extremely challenging. The means for the level of challenges were calculated (Figure 4). The activity considered most challenging by the participants is *developing accuracy in speaking* with a mean of 3.28. Participants perceived as challenging (with a mean of over 3) the activities of *having free discussion in English in class*, *speaking English in a large class*, *talking on various topics*, *developing fluency in English speaking* and *maintaining use of English during class*. Items considered as somewhat challenging (means of between 2 and 3) were *talking on sensitive topics*, *dealing with lack of background/topical knowledge*, *dealing with anxiety*, *using technology to learn speaking*, *learning idioms*, *having communication activities*, *having dialogs and group activities*, *learning pronunciation and grammar*, *joining in interesting practice activities and pair activities* and *having drills*. The remaining 8 activities, with a mean below 2, were perceived as minimally challenging.

Perceptions of spoken English topics, teaching activities and resources

Perceptions of spoken English topics
Participants' preferred spoken English topics are wide ranging (Figure 5). The most preferred topic is culture (50%). This is probably due to their "favouring of English-speaking countries and the unique foreign culture" (Participant B, Survey 1). The second most preferred category was topics related to communication and daily life (45.4%), with participants expressing hopes that topics could be "related to their study and life" (Participant D, Survey 1) or that they could be related to their "daily living language such as how to order food in the restaurants" (Participant E, Survey 1). 36.3% of the participants preferred news as the spoken English topic which they described in terms such as "current policy and hot issues" (Participant C, Survey 1). 18.1% chose movies and music as their preferred topics. A small number of participants selected topics related

to science and technology (13.6%), traveling (13.6%) or business, economy and trade (9%) which they suggested could be "business terms, and communication with boss and colleagues" (Participant F, Survey 1). The least popular other topics, each selected by only one participant were architecture, marriage, politics, fashion and education.
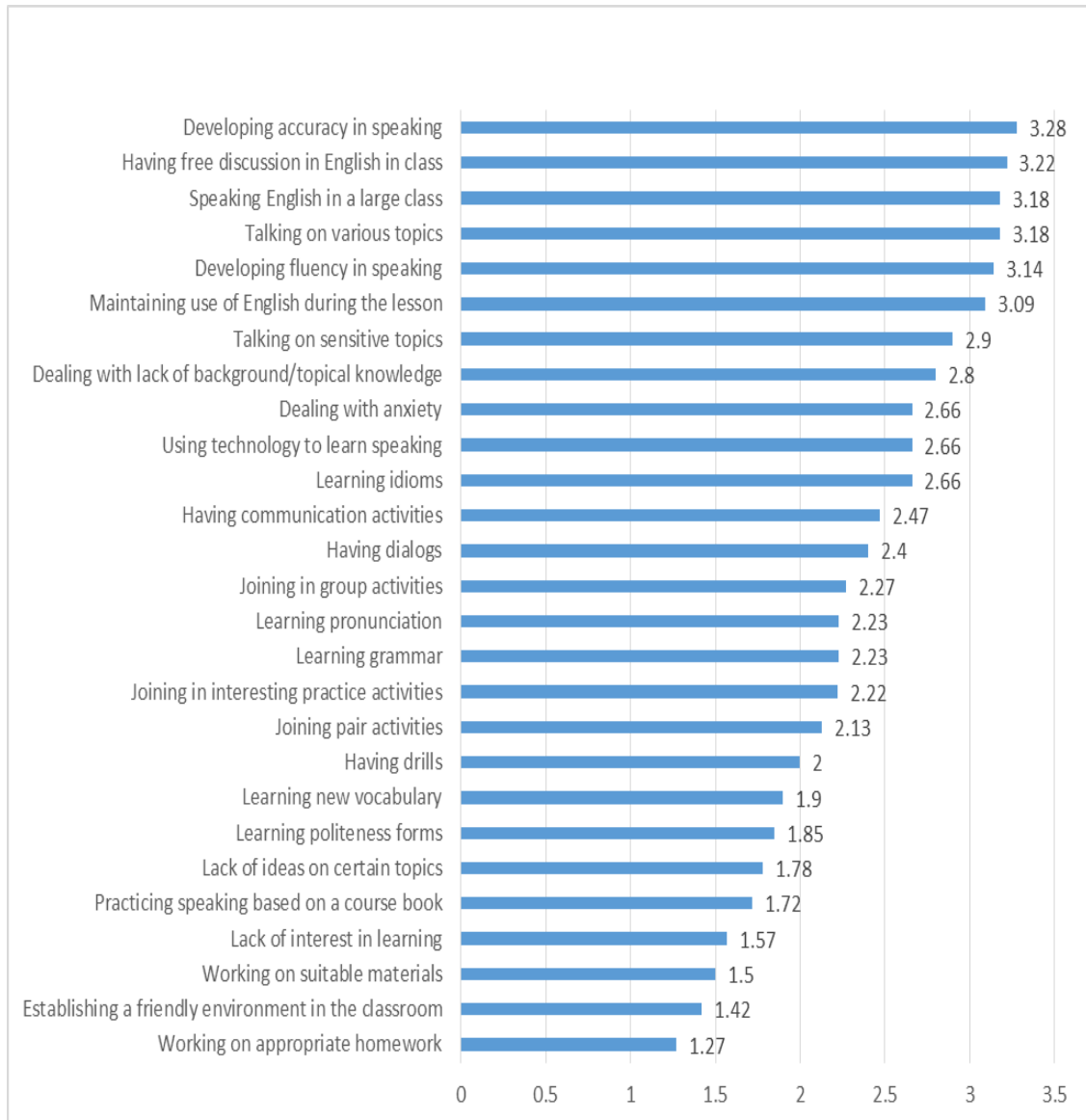

Figure 4. Participants' perceived challenges in taken the spoken English class
Note: the mean is calculated on a range of 1 (not at all challenging) to 5 (extremely challenging)
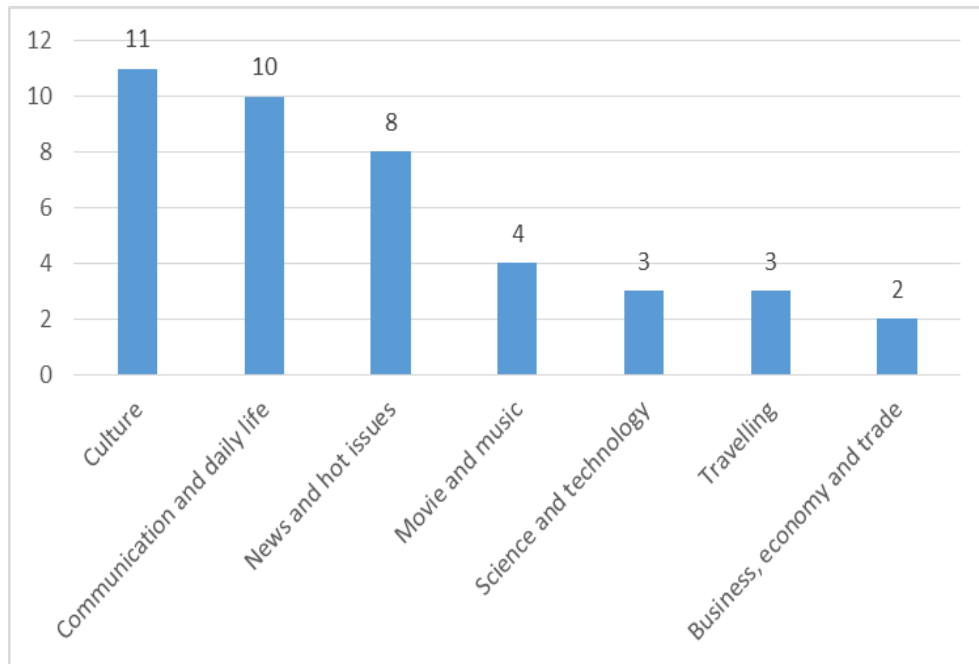
Figure 5. Participants' preferred spoken English topics
Note: Other, less preferred topics, included architecture, marriage, politics, fashion and education

Perceptions of spoken English teaching activities

Participants' perceptions at the beginning of the course of the spoken English teaching activities that should be used in class are shown in Figure 6. The activities which participants most feel should be used often include, group work (45.4%), dialogs (36.3%), pair work (31.8%) and drills (27.2%). The activities which participants most feel should not often be used include, pronunciation work (68.1%) and role plays (59%).
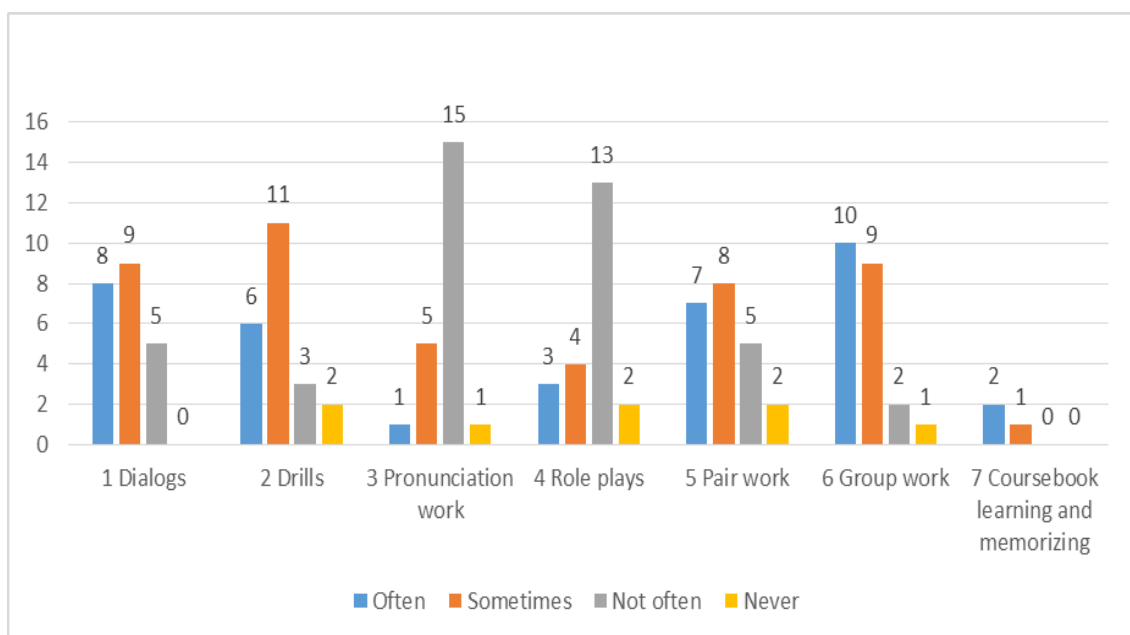

Figure 6. Participants' perceptions of using spoken English teaching activities

In the post-course survey, participants' were asked again about their preferences for English-speaking activities used in class (Table 2). The most popular activities were: watching video (M = 4.8), listening to authentic conversations (M = 4.3), doing pronunciation activities (M = 4), and reading news articles (M = 4). Less popular activities were doing role plays (M = 2.9), and making English presentations (M = 2.6). It is noteworthy that the most popular activities are receptive and the least popular are productive.

Table 2. Participants' preferences for English-speaking activities

Preference	Mean
Watching videos	4.8
Listening to authentic conversations	4.3
Doing pronunciation	4
Reading news articles	4
Writing letters	3.3
Doing group work	3.1
Making mini-talks (1 minute talks)	3.1
Doing role plays	2.9
Making English presentation	2.6

Note: Lower scores express lower mean preferences.
Scale = 1-6.

Perceptions of spoken English teaching resources

Participants' pre-course perceptions of spoken English teaching resources which should be used in class are shown in Figure 7. Participants overwhelmingly (86.3%) expected textbooks to be used often in class. 40.9% of the participants thought videos should sometimes be used. 50% of the participants also considered audio materials could sometimes be used in spoken English classes. Half of the participants did not expect computers to be often used. Only a small number of participants (9.1%) thought that English songs and mobile apps should often be used for spoken English teaching.
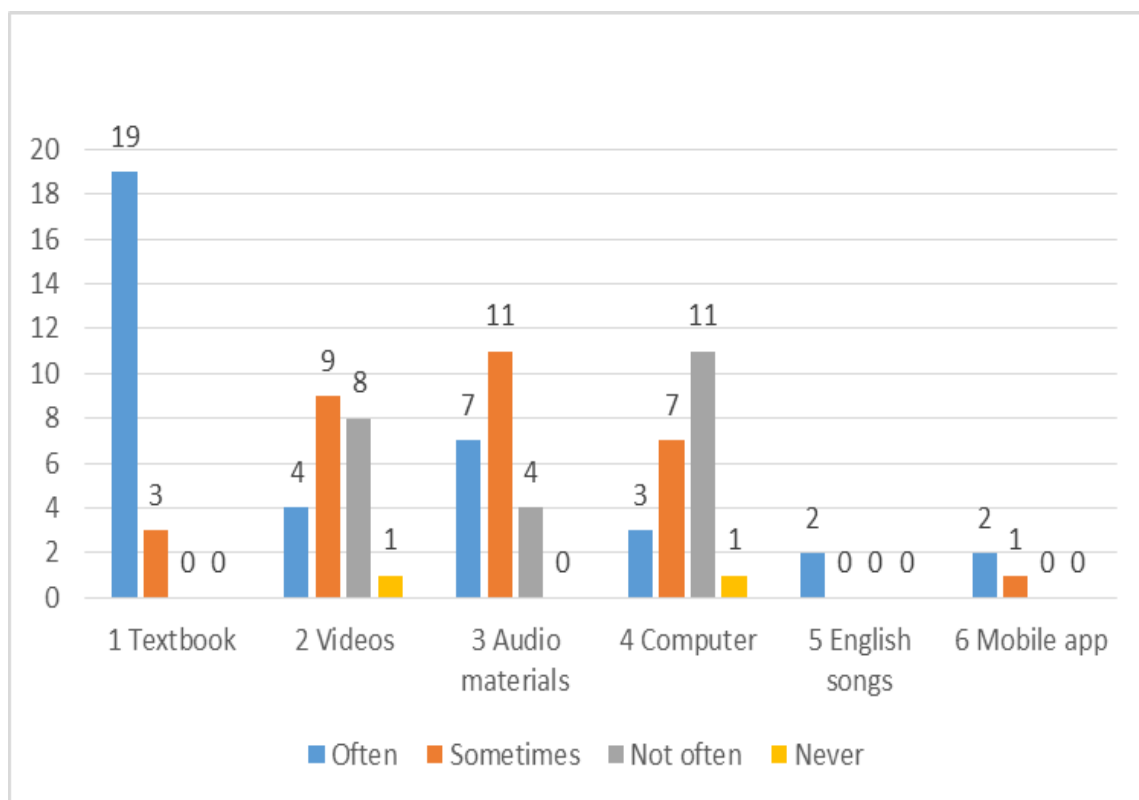
Figure 7. Participants' perceptions of using spoken English teaching resources

Participants' suggestions for improvements

Participants' suggestions for course improvement
Participants provided their suggestions for course improvement in the end-of-course survey. 18.2% of them would have liked additional information to be incorporated. For example:

> Please introduce more hot news and analyse the original expressions in the news. (Participant G, Survey 2)

Others expressed hopes for more systematic guidance on how to improve spoken English, and for more sharing by teachers about the issues discussed in the course content and the videos.

Participants' suggestions for post-course practice
In providing suggestions for post-course practice, 22.7% of the participants hoped to have opportunities for more oral practice after the course. One participant even mentioned organizing more oral activities for the group:

> We should strengthen group cooperation and have more opportunities to share English related information. (Participant H, Survey 2)

13.6% of the participants hoped to have more English learning resources for post-course learning, for example:

> Share some website, video resources for post-course learning. (Participant I, Survey 2)

Evidence of course outcomes

The purpose of the research reported here is to investigate participants' perceptions of the barriers and challenges in learning spoken English. Nevertheless, it is worth recording that the students were successful in their course. All the participants passed an oral English assessment in December 2017 after the conclusion of the course. That assessment consisted of: a discussion on one of the three topics of family, friends and transportation; a three-minute talk on a chosen topic among the themes of friend, building, book, interesting trip and learning English; and an in-depth interaction based on the topic of the talk. Participants were assessed on fluency, coherence, the ability to develop topics, vocabulary and idiomatic language usage, pronunciation and accuracy. The average score on a 100 point range was 79.54, with a highest score of 90 and lowest of 74 (with a standard deviation of 4.52). These results suggest a satisfactory outcome of the oral communication teaching despite the barriers and challenges identified by the participants.

Discussion

The barriers and challenges the students perceived in improving their spoken English

The main barrier to oral communication skills development confronting most participants in this study was inadequate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. There were also barriers in developing confidence in English speaking, coherence and fluency in English speech, and accurate pronunciation. These barriers may be due to a lack of adequate resources and opportunities for participants to practice spoken English. The most challenging tasks for participants in their oral English communication classes include developing accuracy and fluency in speaking, having free discussion in English in class, speaking English in a large class, talking on various topics, and maintaining use of English during class. These findings are consistent with the work of Bailey (2013) and Chen and Goh (2011).

Perceptions of spoken English topics, teaching activities and resources

Participants' preferred topic range for spoken English practice is wide. Most preferred topics include culture, news and hot issues, with some interest in topics centring on: communication and daily life, entertainment, science and technology, business, the economy, trade, and travelling. Participants' favoured group work, dialogs and pair work over pronunciation work and role plays. The most preferred resource for use in the classroom was textbooks. Other preferences included: videos, audio materials, computers, English songs and mobile apps. For in-class activities, participants liked: watching videos, listening to authentic conversations, doing pronunciation work and reading news articles. In-class speaking practices were considered one of the best aspects of the course. In summary, participants preferred spoken practices on a variety of topics and diverse activities such as listening and group work. This study confirms the findings

in the previous literature (Bailey, 2013; G. Brown & Yule, 2000; Tian, 2014) and suggests directions for pedagogical development.

Participants' suggestions
Participants in this study hoped for additional information related to the current news and analysis of original expressions; more systematic guidance on oral communication skills development; and teacher's sharing of their own ideas and opinions. Participants also expressed a desire for more post-course oral practices and oral activities, especially group work. They also asked for more oral communication learning resources such as website and videos. As the majority of participants are beginners in spoken English, they need more resources and input. This is consistent with Bailey's (2013, p. 32) suggestion that for beginners, it is critical to ensure rich input in the classroom as it provides a "supportive and helpful" environment for learners to make mistakes and practice to prepare for the real world communication. Yang and Xiao (2019), writing about a cultural context for teaching oral English similar to that of this study, suggest that a multimodal approach should be adopted to improve the diversity in learning resources provision through movie and music and to promote a pedagogical approach based on situations. Findings in the current study suggest that improvements are required in the oral English teaching and learning environment.

Conclusion
This study has identified the barriers and challenges to oral English communication teaching for English minor undergraduates in a Chinese university. In so doing it has found some consistency between the findings with this under-researched context and other studies of EFL learners in other parts of the world. The study has identified the preferences and dislikes of these learners in terms of topics, teachers' approaches and resources; and the post-course activities that learners would be willing to engage in. This information will assist course developers in tailoring their courses to the needs of these and similar students.

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Appendix 1. Pre-course Survey (adapted from Sadeghi & Richards, 2015, p. 234)

English Oral Communication Needs Analysis

1. Your profile

Gender_____ Age_____

Have you learned any spoken English before? Please specify.

How would you describe your spoken English level?

Beginner	High Beginner	Low Intermediate	Intermediate	High Intermediate	Advanced	Native Level

English Proficiency Test Score (e.g. CET-4, College Entry Test Score, IETLS, TOEFL etc.)

_____

2. What is your main motivation for studying the course?
3. Please describe the main barriers and difficulties in improving spoken English.
4. What are some topics in addition to the textbook you think such a course of spoken English should include?
5. Teaching resources which should be used in English speaking class are listed below. Please ✓ once at often, sometimes, not often or never

	often	sometimes	not often	never
1 textbook				
2 videos				
3 audio materials				
4 computer				
5 other, please specify				

6. Typical classroom activities which should be used are listed below. Please ✓ at often, sometimes, not often or never

Typical classroom activities	often	sometimes	not often	never
1 Dialogs				
2 Drills				
3 Pronunciation work				
4 Role plays				
5 Pair work				
6 Group work				
7 Other, please specify				

7. Please ✔ on the challenges of taking a spoken English class. In the rating scale 1 to 5, not at all challenging is 1, while extremely challenging is 5.

	Not at all challenging 1	A little challenging 2	Somewhat challenging 3	Very challenging 4	Extremely challenging 5
1. Speaking English in a large class					
2. Talking on various topics					
3. Maintaining use of English during the lesson					
4. Joining in interesting practice activities					
5. Working on suitable materials					
6. Working on appropriate homework					
7. Practicing speaking based on a course book					
8. Having free discussion in English in class					
9. Joining in group activities					
10. Joining pair activities					
11. Having dialogs					
12. Having drills					
13. Having communication activities					
14. Developing fluency in speaking					
15. Developing accuracy in speaking					
16. Learning idioms					
17. Learning pronunciation					
18. Learning grammar					
19. Learning new vocabulary					
20. Learning politeness forms					
21. Using technology to learn speaking					
22. Talking on sensitive topics					
23. Dealing with anxiety					
24. Dealing with lack of background/topical knowledge					
25. Establishing a friendly environment in the classroom					
26. Lack of interest in learning					
27. Lack of ideas on certain topics					

Appendix 2. Post-course Survey (adapted from: Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 143; Hedge, 2002, p. 344; Nunan, 2001, p. 188)

English Oral Communication Curriculum Assessment

1. Please circle one of the numbers.

Not at all	Not so much	So-so	A little	Quite a lot	Very much
1	2	3	4	5	6

1. Do you like:						
Listening to authentic conversations	1	2	3	4	5	6
Watching the videos	1	2	3	4	5	6
Doing pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6
Doing role plays	1	2	3	4	5	6
Doing group work	1	2	3	4	5	6
Making mini-talk (such as 1 minute talk)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Writing letters	1	2	3	4	5	6
Reading the news articles	1	2	3	4	5	6
Making English presentation	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. What improvements would you suggest for the course?

3. What would you suggest for follow-up to this course?